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THE MUSTANG-HUNTERS.

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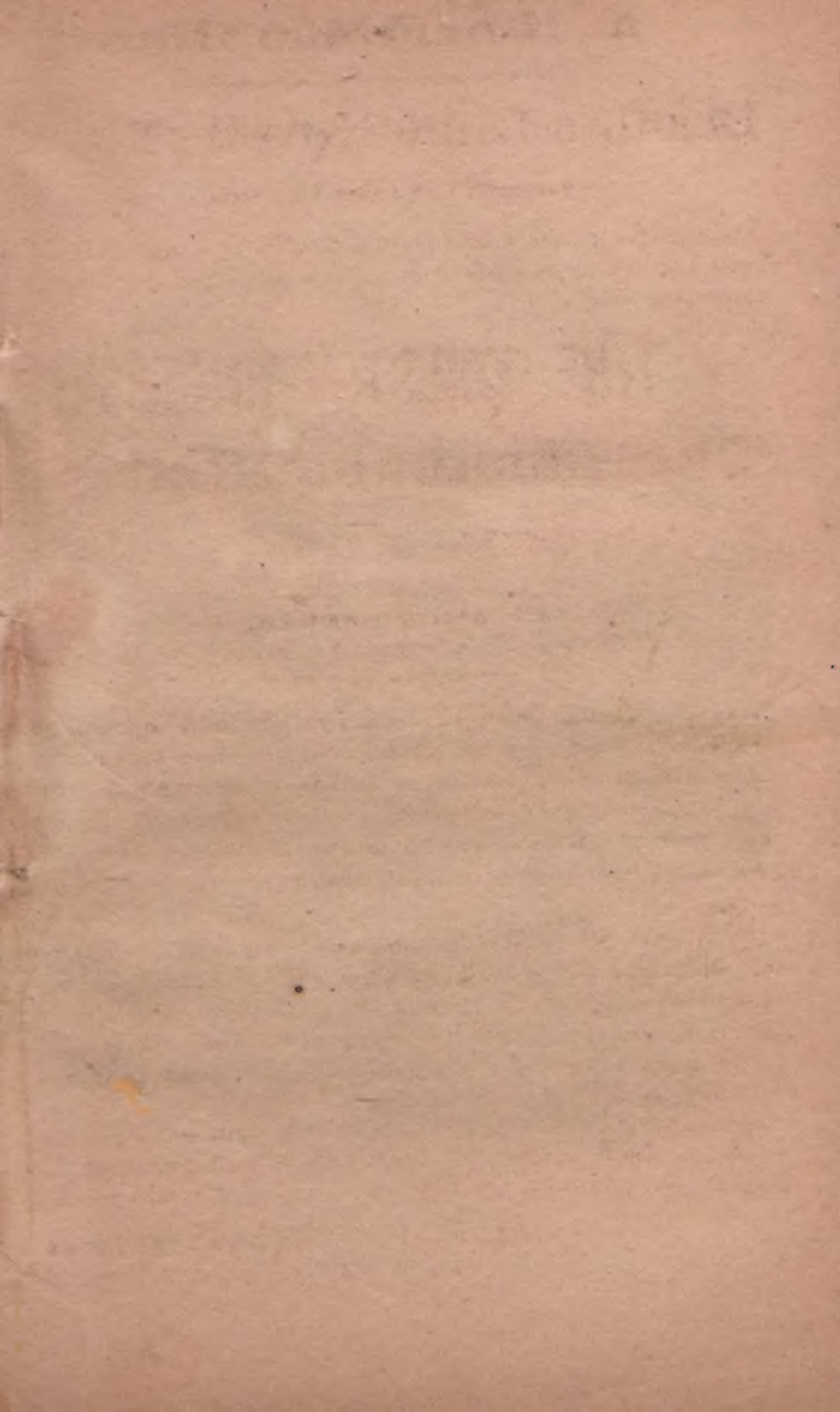
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THE MUSTANG-HUNTERS;

OR,

THE BEAUTIFUL AMAZON OF THE HIDDEN VALLEY.

A TALE OF THE STAKED PLAINS.

BY FREDERICK WHITTAKER.

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THE MUSTANG - HUNTERS.

CHAPTER I.

PETE WILKINS.

A YOUNG man lay at the foot of a tree, looking moodily out over the hot, sunlit prairie, which lay quivering before him in the intense beams of the noonday sun, till every little star-flower seemed to wink sleepily, as it bowed its head in the sultry glare. The prairie itself was vivid with the bright emerald green of early summer in Texas, for it is to the western borders of this enormous State, as large in its area as the whole kingdom of France, that we now invite the reader.

The tree under which the young man lay was one of a clump of live oaks, denominated a *motte*; and draped, like all of its companions, with long, drooping tresses of "Spanish moss," that hung nearly to the ground; and concealed any one in the tree completely from the gaze of a person on the prairie.

The scenery around was monotonous, but grand. Grand from its very monotony, like the ocean. The *motte*, at the edge of which the young man lay, was the only object to diversify the rolling green expanse. Except that, on the horizon to the east, you could see the faint outline of another grove of trees, and it was on this distant object that the eyes of the youth were fixed. He seemed to be sad and despondent, as he lay there, his chin resting on his hands, gazing at the far-off grove.

He was dressed as a dandified sportsman. He wore a very broad-brimmed hat of gray felt, such as is only met with in the south-west. His short coat was of black velvet, and he wore high boots of varnished leather coming to mid thigh, with white buck-skin breeches. He seemed to be well armed, for a Colt's rifle lay beside him. The occasional stamp of a

horse, at a little distance behind, told that he was not deserted, and at the bow of the rich Mexican saddle, heavily mounted with silver, you might have seen a pair of handsome holsters, which contained pistols of the same make as the rifle.

The young man's face was melancholy and handsome, with large dark eyes. It was ornamented with a downy-black mustache, and framed in dark hair.

"How shall I do it?" he murmured to himself. "If I was only a rich man, she would have me; but, how am I to get rich in a hurry, and how *shall* I catch the black mustang?"

His soliloquy was interrupted by the tramp of horses' feet, and presently there hove in sight an odd but picturesque figure, common enough on the prairie. It was that of a regular old-fashioned hunter of the type of Daniel Boone and his brethren.

The coon-skin cap on the head, with the tail falling down the wearer's back; the hunting-shirt and leggings fringed with strips of deer-skin; the quill-embroidered moccasins, are they not familiar to the border? The only particular in which this modern hunter differed from the hunters of an earlier day was in his repeating carbine, and the black holstered revolver at his belt.

He rode a fat little dapple-gray mustang mare.

The stranger came straight toward the tree where the young man lay. A spring, within a few feet of the young wayfarer, had been spied by the sharp-eyed hunter.

He rode slowly up, his keen black eyes glancing restlessly from side to side as he scanned the *motte*. He was evidently a man accustomed to look out for himself in the midst of dangers, and lived under the guardianship of keen senses.

The young man gazed with interest upon his shaggy dark-gray hair and beard that flowed over breast and shoulders like the mane of an old lion. He recognized the other at once. All the frontiersmen of Texas, indeed, knew him well; as did also Frank Weston, who arose as his visitor approached, and stepped forward to meet him.

"Why, Pete Wilkins!" he exclaimed. "Have you dropped from heaven in the nick of time to assist me?"

The old hunter looked at the young man doubtfully for some minutes before he replied. Then he swung himself off

his saddle, and coming up to the other, placed two brawny hands on his shoulders and inspected his features closely. The young fellow bore the examination with a smile, and the hunter seemed to be trying to recollect him.

"Wal, younker," he said, at last, "I seen ye *sumw'ar*, I'll swow; but whar in creation 'twas, durn my karkidge if I kin tell. How-de du, anyway?"

And he transferred his dexter paw to the hand of the other, which he shook heartily, with a gripe that made the other wince.

"And who are yer, anyway?" he continued, still surveying the youth. "I han't seen yer for a many year, that I'm sartin on. And time changes you young fellers e'ena'most as much as he does me."

And the old hunter gave a half-humorous, half-melancholy smile, as he surveyed his own grizzled beard, which flowed over his breast.

The young man laughed at the other's perplexity.

"You ought to know me, Pete," he said. "It was you who first taught me how to draw a bead on a deer or turkey; and all I know of woodcraft, I owe to you."

"You must 'a' be'n a mighty small younker then," returned old Pete, still regarding him, doubtfully. Then a flash of remembrance seemed to come over him, and he cried:

"*Now* I know yer. It ar' little Frank Weston, as used ter play hookey from school down to Westonville, ter go a-huntin' with old Pete! Why, how *are* yer, Frank? I'm pesky glad ter see yer. Why, yer grown e'ena'most as tall as I ar', an' I mind yer no more nor knee-high to a 'skeeter! Why, *how* are yer?"

And the rough hunter worked away at the youth's hand as if he had been working at a pump.

"I'm very well, thank you, Pete," said young Weston, laughing. "But don't mash my hand all to pieces. How have *you* been?"

"Always the same old two-and-sixpence," answered the other. "As I was riz, so I grow'd. As I've grow'd, so I'll die. Some day ye'll hear the coyotes a-howlin' over a burnt-out camp-fire, and old Pete 'll die on the broad perary as he's lived on, man and boy, nigh on sixty year now. And how

hev *you* been, Frank? How's yer father, an' the old plantation, down to Westonville?"

The young man's face clouded.

"My father and mother are both dead, Pete," he said, "and the old plantation was sold by the sheriff for the benefit of the creditors, not a year ago."

"Yer don't say!" returned Pete, much concerned. "Do tell! Why, Frank, my boy, tell's all 'bout it. I'll hobble the hoss and turn him out to graze while yer tell me all yer troubles."

And suiting the action to the word, Pete ungirthed and removed the rough wooden saddletree from the back of his gray pony, and allowed the latter to crop the herbage at leisure. Then the old hunter produced a store of dried venison from his wallet, and inviting the young man to sit down, he listened, while young Weston, over the "dinner," told his story.

"You know, Pete," the young fellow began, "that my father, the colonel, owned nearly the whole of Westonville at one time, and had hundreds and thousands of acres covered with cattle and horses, besides field-hands to cultivate the cotton plantation. He might have kept it all, but for one thing. He *would* gamble. Even during the war our estate did not suffer much. We depended more on our cattle than cotton, and did not feel the emancipation of the slaves much. But when my father came back, after Kirby Smith's surrender, he brought back from the service two bad habits, drinking and gambling.

"My mother died, as you know, when I was a little boy, and it was but little I learned at the old school at Westonville."

"Durned little," assented Pete, suspending his munching a moment; "but I l'arned yer some things, ef the schoolmarm didn't."

"My father sent me away when I was eleven years old, and I was put to a boarding-school up North. There there was no hunting to take me away, and I had nothing to do but learn. I did learn to some purpose. During the war, my father sent me to a German university to finish my education, and strictly forbade my coming home, till the war was over.

Then I returned, and found things going to rack and ruin. My father, bitter and desperate about the fall of the Confederacy, sat brooding all day. At night he would go to the village tavern, and drink his senses away with "rot-gut" whisky, while he played poker with all the professional gamblers of the State. Many and many a quarrel arose there, and several deaths occurred, in which the colonel came off victorious; till at last, about a year ago now, he fell in with a notorious desperado, named Austin, who shot him before he could draw his own pistol."

"I know that 'ere Austin," said Pete, scratching his head, "and he ar' one of the can'tankerousest varmint's as ever I did know. There ar' only one man in all Texas as he ar' afraid of, and that's little Gilmore."

"I know another," said Frank Weston, gloomily, "and that is myself. When the news was brought to me, I was at home, and I galloped to the village before doing any thing else, determined to shoot the murderer on sight. But he fled the place and has avoided me ever since."

"Wal, nobbe he is afraid!" said old Pete, doubtfully, "but I would never trust to that of ever yer see him. Git out yer six-shooter first; that's the way to plan /-on. But how did yer come here, hel? That's what's the matter."

"It's a sad story, Pete," said the other, gloomily. "I found, when I came to settle up my father's estate, that it was mortgaged to its fall value, and as there was nothing wherewith to meet the creditors, the sheriff of the county sold it at auction, in a month after my father's death. The furniture and live stock, carriages, wagons and working tools, etc., paid off all the debts, and left me at last as you see me. I only retained, of all my father's stuff, one horse, and he stands by the tree there."

"But he ar' a ripper," observed Pete, parenthetically.

"Yer may trust, Pete. He is one of the sons of old Lexington, and he can come near his father's time, too, in a four-mile race."

"Yer don't say?" exclaimed Pete, admiringly. "And whar hev yer be'n since, Frank?"

"I've wandered all over Texas, trying to find Austin, to avenge my father's death. I saved about a thousand dollars

out of the wreck, along with the colonel's pistols and rifle. I've not found his murderer yet, but when I do, one of us must fall."

"And how can ye out here, lad?" queried the hunter. "We're outside the settlements here, and there ain't a ranch around for miles, 'cept old Moreau's, the French place—Why, what's the muss?"

He concluded with this question, noticing that the other blushed deeply. Frank Weston hesitated a moment, and then turned to the grizzly hunter.

"Pete Wilkins," he said, "you're an old friend of mine. Would you stand by me in trouble?"

"I would that, lad," said the kindhearted mountain man. "What's the matter? I'll help ye, ef I kin."

"That same Moreau that you mentioned just now, Pete—he has—a—daughter—named Gabrielle."

Old Pete regarded the other with a queer glance for a moment. At last he burst into a laugh, smiting his thigh with his hand.

"I knowed it!" he cried; "I knowed it! I knowed as how thar war a woman in it, somehow! What is it, lad? I'm the feller as helps all the unfortunat lovers to git the knot tied. Didn't I help Sir John, the Britisher, to git that ar' poaty little wife o' his'n, Dona Pepita? Ah, she war a beauty, she war. What's *your* gal like, Frank? I'll help yer, my boy."

"Will you?" said Frank, enthusiastically. "Oh, Pete, she's as beautiful as an angel. She has hair as just like gold in the sun. She has eyes like that sky overhead. Her voice is like the cooing of doves. But, oh, Pete! she's poor and rich, and doesn't love me—more. I nother rich men were rich, and then her father bowed down to me. But now that I am poor she will not look at me with favour, and refuse my suit, unless I can do something myself."

"Why don't ye leave her, lad?" asked old Pete, with simple directness. "It be don't keer a cuss fur yer, yer honour! keer a cuss fur *her*—need yer?"

"But I think she does, Pete, I think she does more for me a little. She told me yesterday that I might win her if I would, but that she had resolved never to marry any man who could

not bring her the Black Mustang of the Prairies to ride to church on; and, as she said this, she smiled upon me as only she can smile, and said: 'Frank, get him for me, and I'll love you forever.' And I came away from the ranch, and ever since that I've been beating my brains out to think of how I shall find the Black Mustang."

Old Pete Wilkins ruminated in silence for some time. At last he looked up.

"Are yer sure the gal ain't foolin' yer, Frank?"

"I think not," said the youth; "I'm *sure* she likes me a little," (he was gradually growing confident in his talk,) "and her father was under great obligations to mine once. If I can only find home the Black Mustang, she is pledged to me; and has given me a year to accomplish my task. See, here is her pledge." And he displayed to the hunter a gold locket in which reposed a coil of bright hair.

"Well, hi!" said Pete, after a pause, "it'll be a long hunt and a hard hunt, and I can't promise yer the hoss. Many and many's the crowd as hev started after *that* hoss, hopin' to get him. Growers an' Injins, hunters an' sojers, they've all had a crack at him; but I never seen the hoss as c'd keep him in sight for half an hour. It's the b'lief o' sum, as how he's the devil hisself, and he *kin* run like the devil, I tell yers."

"Then is there no hope of ever catching him?" asked young Weston, in a despondent tone.

"I don't say there ain't," said Pete. "Ye've got a hoss of yer own that as'll give even the Black Mustang a hard push, if he's what you say, a four-mile racer."

"And he is," replied Weston, eagerly. "He can give any common horse a mile in a four mile race, and beat him on the third mile."

"Well, if he *kin* do all that, yer may ketch the Black; but I tell yer, Frank, yer've got a hard road to travel."

And the old hunter forthwith entered into a long account of that singular animal, the Black Mustang, which we will give, stripped of the unsmooth diction of the narrator, and convey to the reader all the information that we can as to the habits and ways of the wild horse of the Texan and Mexican pampas.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BLACK MUSTANG.

AROUND the headwaters of the Colorado and Brazos rivers, to the west of that curious belt of wood known as the "Cross Timbers," which separates the great upland prairies of Texas from its eastern slope, the mustang attains his full perfection. Here he roams in herds, several hundred strong, subdivided into bands of twenty or thirty mares, each band led by a stallion.

A sort of military organization prevails in these herds — all the minor bands owing the leadership of the patriarchal stallion of the herd. He feels a little apart from the rest and keeps a keen look-out to *beard* of the herd. He comes to his nostrils to inform him of enemies to wit: man. The scent of the mustang is singularly acute, and he keeps at a respectful distance from human beings.

The beauty of a herd of Texan mustangs is increased by one who has not seen them in their native haunts. Shining jet-black, snow-white, delicate cream yellow, and the most intense blood bay are common in the stallions, but the mares are striped, speckled and spotted in the most extraordinary manner.

The black rosettes of the jaguar on a yellow ground, the stripes of the zebra, the brilliant patches of black, red and white that mark the tortoise-shell cat, all are represented in a herd of mustangs. Every variety in color and marking is common. The sight of a herd at liberty can hardly be fully enjoyed save through a telescope, for, as we have seen, the mustangs are jealous of the presence of human beings and wary to a remarkable degree.

Sometimes stallions are found who have left the herd and live apart in solitude. The cause of their oddity is unknown, but it is a curious fact that these solitaires are always of far superior size and beauty to those in the herds, and soon become celebrated among trappers and hunters.

Of such was the celebrated White Horse of the Prairies, described by Kendall in 1844. This remarkable stallion was often seen in the vicinity of the Cross Timbers, near the head-waters of the Trinity and Brazos. He was a natural pacer or rack and was never known to "break up" from his gait, however hardy pressed. On one occasion he was chased for three days successively, by American hunters. But in all that time he never broke his pace, and the pursuit could not be pressed close enough to prevent him from stopping to drink.

Several other solitary stallions have lived and died at different periods on the southern prairies, but the most celebrated of all was the one about which Pete Wilkins and Frank Weston were now conversing.

The animal had made his appearance at the edge of the Sacred Prairie near the source of the Colorado, about two years before. He then seemed to be only a colt, so slender was his form. But his speed was prodigious even at that period, when he could not have been more than three years old. Ever since then he had only improved in appearance. His haunts lay in a part of the country much exposed to predatory Comanches and Kiowas, which rendered his capture still more difficult and dangerous.

Three different parties had succeeded in getting within a hundred yards of the famous steed without exciting his alarm, when he had risen up and defied pursuit. His swiftness was such that no one had ever been able to gain a single foot upon him after he started. Inside of an hour he could put miles of space between himself and his pursuers, and he always disappeared with nightfall.

He was described as a horse of unusual size for a mustang, and of remarkably beautiful proportions. His mane and tail were partly curly long, the former sweeping below his knees and the latter trailing on the ground. His color, as his name implied, was coal black, without a single white hair about him that could be perceived.

He must have been a wonderful leaper, too, for on one occasion, when a party of hunters had formed a circle, and nearly surrounded him, having driven him to the edge of a precipitous cañon, hundreds of feet in depth, the Black Mustang bounded and cleared the hunters and made a clean leap over

one man, horse and all, who intercepted him. The leap must have been over nine feet in height, and the black steed escaped in safety from the greatest peril he had yet encountered. But he left that part of the country after that, and betook himself to the broad savannas that lie between the Rio Pecos and the Colorado. Here he had remained, practically undisturbed for the last year.

And so, as Frank felt constrained to confess to himself, to tell him to fetch the Black Mustang was to tell him to undertake well-nigh an impossibility, and the fair Gabrielle, with her sunny curls must have thought so too, after she had depicted him on his hopeless quest. Whether she cared for him or not, the willful little beauty knew best; but it is certain that her father, cautious and rich, did not much favor the schemes of the ruined young gentleman, from whose father he had received so many benefits in the days when Colonel Weston was a cotton grankee, and Pierre Moreau a poor lawyer at New Orleans.

And Gabrielle had acted kindly toward Frank, in softening the rebuff which he would certainly have experienced from her father. She had induced the old gentleman to agree to her own conditions, and although it seemed as if it were an utterly hopeless task for poor Frank to accomplish, alone and unarmed, it was certain that the Moreaus would keep their part of the contract, should he, by any stroke of unlucked-for good fortune, succeed against probability.

Old Pete Willins, whose soft heart was always ready to be engaged in a love-affair, was only too willing to lend his help to the unfortunate pair of lovers.

"Ef that ar' black ain't the devil hisself," he said, when he had finished his description of the mysterious steed, "we'll manage to git him, by hook or by crook. He's pooty light on the foot, I know, and he ar' got sharp eyes and good nose, but he ain't got the gumption as a human critter hev, arter all's said. Ef we kum'n't run him down, we kin give him a darned good chase with that ar' fourtiber of yours, Frank, and ef he beats him *ez*, why I'm bound to hev him. That's one way as we never hev tried arter the black, and that is '*we'll kin him down*.' Ef every thing fails, we kin do that, and we'll fix him *sure*, then."

"How do you mean 'walk him down,' Pete?" asked the young hunter, in surprise. "We can't surely catch a swift horse by following him on foot—can we?"

"If that's enough on us we kin do that, even; but I don't exactly keer to do my 'walkin' down' afoot, myself. I'll show yer how it's done, when we cum to ketch the black, ef so be yer far-riider ain't able to run him down."

"If I only can get within a hundred yards of the black, I'll trust old General against him, old as he is," said Frank, proudly. "But you must remember that the General can't do his best without oats and corn, while the other horse is used to grass-feeding all his life."

"Well, well, lad. We kin but try," said old Pete, kindly; "and the sooner we git away from here now, the sooner we'll be on our journey."

Half an hour afterward, the two friends were riding westward, the sturdy little gray mare stepping out alongside of the powerful thoroughbred.

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE GILMORE.

THE two companions rode out from the shelter of the *mesquite*, and headed their horses to the westward. The sun had passed the meridian by two or three hours, and a fresh breeze had just started up, cooling the atmosphere, and waving the tops of the grass and the leaves of the mesquite trees.

"Old Murrel knows I done well what he was after," observed the hunter, "when he took his claim down here. 'Tain't no bad, neither, as it stands farther in, but the grass ain't turned as good, and his ranch is strong enough to keep and supporting General, as he aint waitin' for it."

Frank Weston smiled, as he looked back at the distant ~~ground~~ that marked the Indian village where dwelt his beloved. It was one of the old Indian settlements established by the former owners of Texas, the cowardly Mexicans, the better to enable

them to keep out the Indians. Well did he remember the long loop-holed wall, and the great gate, out of which he had so lately passed in silence and dejection.

"I wonder shall I ever see the hacienda again?" he said musingly.

"See it? In course yer will!" said Pete, stolidly. "What's to prevent it?"

"We are going on a difficult and dangerous quest," said Frank, sadly; "and we may never come back alive."

The poor fellow was desperately in love, and pining for the first time, from the object of his affection. He felt very gloomy and despondent thereof. Old Pete perceived it, and laughed at his *blue fit*.

"We'll come back safe enough, inside of six weeks, y'under," he said. "Don't yer be givin' low spirits away. We ain't half started yet. One thing, we're out of them pesky *matrimonies* now, whar I never sit without thinkin' every red I've got."

"Ah! indeed?" said Frank, anxious to divert his thoughts from their gloomy turn. "Did you lose much this time, Pete?"

"Much?" echoed the hunter, with a grin. "I was plumb ed out regular, only last night, to Hamilton. I'm a fool, but a damned fool, when I git money, that I strike for the *gamblers* to hev a spree. Only a month ago I lost a thousand dollars, good hard money, paid down ter me at Calcutta by that 'ere Britisher as I was tellin' yer on. He war a real gentleman, he war. So I starts for Austin City on a lark, and I tell *you* a lie'st I've he! At last I'd lost almost all my money at that 'ere damned *board*, and I started for the prison. I got ter Hamilton yesterday, and that I got drunk, as usual, darn my karkid! When I kaint get kider I'm the common feller again, but *that* fixes me. I meet *meets* up ter *played* poker with a lot of gamblers from Houston, and the end of the night found me dead back. Nary red. That one little cuss of a Gilmore won the most of it, and he plays *game* fair, so I couldn't complain. And so this mornin' I starts out on a lark, and who should I meet but you."

"Pete, tell me," said Frank, "who is this *little cuss* that you've mentioned just now? You said that he was the only person that scared old Austin feared."

"Little Gilmore! Not know Little Gilmore?" echoed Pete. "Why, law, he's the most noted desperado in all Texas. He ar' killed more men, white, red, and yellow, than any feller in these ere diggins. He ain't over five feet and an inch in his boots, and he ar' got a hand like a little gal's and long ears like a cat. But I tell you he's some on a pistol shot! I ain't never of a gunnora my self, and I can shoot pretty well, but Little Gilmore, he kin put six shots into the same hole as fast as he can pull the triggers."

"And what is he doing out in Hamilton?" asked Weston, curiously. "There's not much out here to tempt a gambler."

"That's what I burn't make out," said Old Pete. "I asked him, but he answered, 'Private business, sir,' kind o' odd like. I guess he's a lookin' for Tom Austin. He's followed him for ever so long now."

"Austin? And why?" ejaculated Frank. "Has he, too, got any thing against this man?"

"He has that," said the hunter, emphatically. "Little Gilmore used to be as good as a little chap as ever stepped, but some of his size, I guess, till that ere Austin come and pulled on him. Austin met him one day at Houston, years ago, when Little Gilmore was a small town boy. He seen him a-walkin' the streets with his gal, as he was a good to marry. Austin, jist out of pure curiosity and mean ness, he goes up ter the gal as he jist knowed by sight, and asks her to be his. Little Gilmore seen as he meant to be sick on him, and he pitches right into Austin, tooth and nail, such as he was. But Tom Austin jist chewed him up in two minutes. The little feller was unarmed, and Tom, he beat him awful, and left him on the sidewalk while he walks off with Gilmore's gal."

"But, good heavens!" cried Frank. "You don't mean to say that she went with him?"

"You shall see," said Pete, positively. "He turned out to be a very good job to get him and her. Little Gilmore never looked at a girl since the two had eloped for New Orleans."

"He didn't marry her with him as Austin was his first wife or thing, neither. And then he got down up at his home, and left Houston. Nobody knowed your old gal, but he come back at the head of a lot of gamblers, the desperado

he's b'en ever since. He's managed to skeer that Tom Austin somehow, though they've never met since the day Tom licked him so bad. Little Gilmore follows him all over Texas, and Tom sits up and *gits*, as soon as ever he hears Gilmore's comin'. He knows the little cuss kin shoot the ears off him in no time, *noo*, though he'd never fired a pistol the day he got walloped."

"Then Austin must be somewhere near," said Frank, excitedly. "And perhaps I am turning my back on him? I must go back, and see this Gilmore, and find if he knows any thing of his whereabouts."

And the impetuous youth had actually turned his horse to execute his purpose, when Pete checked him.

They were out on the broad, green prairie now, and the *roche* and hacienda of Monsieur Moreau were alike invisible. Pete pointed to the west, towards which the sun was sinking to meet a distant line of purple peaks just lifting above the horizon.

"Look thar, yoanker," he said. "D'yer know what they call them ar' hills?"

"No," answered Frank, surprised at the question.

"Them are the Phantom Hills, and t'other side of them be the peraries whar the Black Mustang ranges. If yer want me to help yer thar, I'll do it; but I'm durned ef I'm a goin' on any wild goose-chase arter Tom Austin or any of his kidney. That's so!"

Frank hesitated a moment. The good natured mountaineer settled the dilemma for him.

"If yer wants ter find Tom Austin any time, yander, yer kin do it, arter yer've got the black. Stick to that, and yer'll git the pooty Gabrielle."

The last words decided the young Texan, and he rode on, after his companion in silence.

Pete urged the little mare from a walk into a steady canter, the natural journey pace of the mustang, and the powerful thoroughbred of Western was compelled to make her a smart trot to overtake her. The young man showed her that considerable respect for his companion's horse, and expressed himself to that effect.

Pete patted the grey's neck affectionately, saying:

"This 'ere little mare' are worth her weight in dollars, she are. I bought her at El Paso, 'bout two month ago, and gave her 'bout dollars too, with her for my old States horse, and I'm darned if she kin't run away from him, and kill a dozen common horses. She are clear grit, she are. She'll eat fat on corn-stalks, and as for mesquite grass, she'll go eighty mile a day on it."

Indeed, the little creature seemed as if she could realize her rider's opinion of her. Although very small, there was an appearance of indomitable spirit in her eye large and wild in expression, that proclaimed her to be an "all day horse." The two companions rode gayly on for the rest of the afternoon, striking out into the boundless prairie, and leaving behind them the last signs of civilization in the village of Hammon. The rolling green swells of the prairie, waving with grass and flowers; the dark, isolated mottes, with their drooping fringes of Spanish moss, that made the grained live oaks resemble weeping willows—one succeeded the other with the grand monotony of prairie scenery, all through the journey. The distant peaks of the Phantom Hills began to lift their heads plainer and plainer into the clear atmosphere. At last the sun shone right into their faces, bathing the tops of the little swells in a golden glow, and then it was that the old hunter pointed and pointed to a dark line of timber about a mile ahead.

"That," he said; "that's our camp ground for tonight. That ar' creek runs into the Colorado, and that's deer and bear in plenty in the bottom. Hurry up, and we'll git that afore dark."

The two broke into a brisk gallop, which speedily brought them to the edge of a deep valley, cut out, in the course of centuries, by the stream that they could now see below, bordered with trees of every variety.

The old hunter rode down to the water's edge, and dismounted.

"Now then, youder," he said, "if you'll take care of the horses I'll get stamm for our supper. This 'ere dried venison ain't what it's cracked up to be. Ye'll find the hobbles behind the saddle."

And without waiting for an answer, old Pete rode off

through the trees, leaving the young man to attend to the two horses. To say truth, he was not sorry to do so. Frank Weston was devotedly fond of hunting, but since his boyhood had had but little opportunity for so doing. He felt by no means confident of his ability to kill a deer for supper, and was quite willing to trust to old Pete's skill.

So he unsaddled the two animals, and arranged a comfortable sleeping-place for himself and partner. Then he propped the holdalls, with which he confined the forelegs of the horse and the mare, and turned the pair loose on a little plot of long, sweet grass that grew by the river side. The animals set to work with the utmost activity, while Frank commenced the operation of building a fire.

He had got it well started when his ears were roused with the sound of Pete Wilkins' rifle, and he leaped on all the dry sticks he could find, till a cheerful, ruddy blaze flared up the trunks of the trees around, now standing out, dark and gloomy, in the fast deepening shades of evening.

About ten minutes afterward the old hunter made his appearance, bearing on his shoulders the hind-quarter of a deer, which proved to be both fat and savory.

It was soon cut into steaks, and broiling over the fire on that simplest of spits, a sharp stick.

The scene was picturesque and romantic in the highest degree, as the beams of the little camp fire lighted up the lonely valley, the figures of the old hunter and the young Texan and the horses grazing close by.

"How beautiful all this is, Pete," observed Weston, his impressible fancy touched by the beauty of the scene.

"It ain't that," said Pete, emphatically. "Give me a hunter's life afore all the spices and drinks of the settler's life. If it warn't for my trips to the settler's, I'd never be hunting. But a man must git powder and lead now and then, and so I go huntin'. And this 'ere old sixteen-shooter, that he ar' a pretty good gun, he warn't none lookin' after them a-cold in his pocket. Kenna git a catfish or a trout of Austin city, as well as I can."

"How did you get that place, Pete?" inquired Weston. "You're the first mountain man I ever saw with a gun."

"A-come over at Fort Lancaster give it to me, and the hunter. 'Twa a smart for the fort there. He tell me."

Here the hunter suddenly stopped short and listened intently. Frank could hear nothing, but his companion, accustomed to the prairie, had detected above the chirp and song of cricket and tree toad, a different sound.

In a moment more he nodded his head.

"I think so much," he muttered, and as he spoke, he rose to his feet and stole off among the trees, noiseless as a ghost.

Frank Weston caught up his rifle and followed.

A dead silence fell on the little valley, only interrupted by the sound of the hunter's rifle, in proof that some one the traveler in Texas. Presently, however, the ear of the younger man, strained to the utmost, heard what his companion had long before. A horse was approaching at a rapid gait. As it came nearer, they could hear the clear tenor voice of a man singing. Frank, who had visited Europe, recognized the well-known air, "You'll Remember Me," from the opera of the Bohemian girl. Old Pete gave a smothered chuckle as he listened.

"Gee! I will remember you," he muttered. "You next to a damned fool to go a-hunt at this time of night! Should have that. Come, Frank, we might as well go back to our fire, this time. 'Tain't either an Indian or any thin' else dam' to us."

And the old hunter stalked silently back to the fire, where he threw on an armful of brush.

As the bright blaze flared up, they could hear the approaching horseman cease his song for a moment, and the hoofs of the horse also stopped. A moment afterwards, the song was resumed, and the horse struck into a gallop, that rapidly approached them. Presently they heard the snapping of dry sticks, that told that the stranger was coming through the forest of woods, and in a short time a man, mounted on a bay horse, rode boldly out from the shadow of the trees, and advanced to the fire, after dismounting.

Pete Weston uttered an exclamation of wonder as his eyes fell on the stranger.

"Little fellow, by Jove, and!" he cried.

"That same man I told you of the stranger, in a low voice, with the accent and tone of a marked refinement, "and very happy to meet you, Wilkins, for the fact is, I was looking for you."

As he spoke, Frank Weston examined the other with great interest. It was the first time he had met the celebrated desperado.

He saw a small man, of slight, delicate frame, with a fair, pale face, ornamented by a handsome mustache of pale flaxen tint. Curling ringlets of hair fell down on each side of the womanish features, from under the shelter of a broad brimmed hat of black elaze, heavily ornamented with gold lace and tassels of gold.

His costume was in the Mexican style, of black velvet, slashed with scarlet silk, and covered with gold embroidery. He wore around his waist a sash of scarlet silk, tinged with gold, in which Frank counted the butts of no less than four revolvers; and in his hand he bore a short carbine whose two barrels, one under the other, proclaimed the deadly sixteen-shot repeater. The dress, weapons and horse furniture of the stranger were alike rich and beautiful, being laced with gold. His fingers sparkled with jewels, and in his ears glittered large diamond earrings, that would have been the envy of a New York belle. But both the man and his equipments looked strangely out of place on the wild prairie.

"Pray introduce me to your friend, Pete," pursued the other, with his low, sweet voice. "Among gentlemen I am sure that there ought to be acquaintance and friendship."

"Certainly," said Pete, hastily. Weston noticed that the frontiersman was wonderfully polite to the delicate little stranger, whom he could have probably choked to death with one hand. But every one was civil to Little Glimmer. He had a knack of shooting so wonderfully quick, that it was hardly worth while to be rude to him.

So Frank Weston was duly introduced to him by name.

"Mr. Weston," said this singular person, "I have heard of you before, sir. You and I are on the same track, in part, I believe."

"If you mean the death of that man, Austin, you are right, Mr. Glimmer," returned our hero. "But at present I am bound on another quest still, that of the Black Mustang."

"I had heard of that too," answered the other, quickly; "Mr. Moreau and I have met before, and I saw him only the day, when he mentioned your purpose. I am going the same

way myself, but for a different purpose. One of Morcan's employees told me that he had seen Pete Wilkins riding west, alone with you, and I followed you up till I found you here."

"Set down and have some supper, Gil," said the old hunter at this moment. "Yer must be hungry."

"Many thanks, Peter, I will," said the other, politely. He proceeded to unsaddle his horse and dispose his effects on the ground, after which he did justice to a venison steak.

"And now, Peter," he said, as he was reloading himself with powder, while the bay horse was munching the grass in the next section, "I suppose you want to know what I want you for. I'll tell you. That infernal scoundrel, Tom Austin, has joined the Comanches and he's out on this very trail your friend's on—the trail of the Black Mustang. It seems that the scoundrel found some way of worming himself into favor with Big Thunder, the Comanche chief, by giving him a chance to capture a lot of old Springfield muskets sent back from the war, and come to be converted to brass knibbers. Tom was killed, but after the war was well planned, and he escaped to the Comanches. Now, Peter, if you can guide me through these prairies to Big Thunder's village, it's all I ask of you. I can shoot straight and quick, but it's all I can do, except play possum, and you know the plains. I will give you all I have about me, gold, notes, jewelry and all, the day I catch Tom Austin, face to face."

"Well," returned Peter, slowly, "I'm gittin' set up in biz, I see. I won't help yer till I've got through with the yonder here, for I've promised him. After that I'm ready to take yer thar."

"Mr. Weston," said the little stranger, turning to Frank, "I am in a dilemma as to my future course. I have told Tom Austin enough, and I do not wish to deprive you of your prize. I am a gambler, as you know, and you know I cannot help myself. What you think the best way to do is to make a wager, cannot you see that? If you win, I will assist you with horse and outfit for your purpose in any way I like. If I win, you will help me to capture Tom Austin, as you have said. Do you agree?"

"Frank," said the little stranger, "I have decided. I don't know what to do. Let us have it to clear up as you suggest."

Gilmore produced a set of dice from his pocket in a moment. He offered them to Weston to examine, who pronounced them perfectly fair. They made three throws each, in which Frank threw the highest.

The gambler bowed low.

"Mr. Weston," he said, "I will help you as I promised. Good-night."

And without another a word, he stretched himself out to rest, by the fire, with his head on the saddle.

Five minutes after, the camp was still.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PASS OF DEATH.

ABOUT noon of the day following, three horsemen drew rein at the foot of a long line of steep cliffs that rose abruptly from the midst of the prairie, with a few scattered shrubs and grass. They were all well mounted and armed.

The middle one was dressed as a trapper, in buckskins and leggings of deer skin, and mounted on a little grey mare, that tossed her head as proudly as a horse six times her size.

The second, in more civilized hunting garb, rode a compact horse of great size and power, a thoroughbred and a carrier of the finest kind.

The third, accustomed in the picturesque costume of a Mexican ranchero, rode in a slender bay horse, almost the same build, but of the more slender kind, such as are used in some heats.

The three appeared somewhat at a loss how to proceed. The latter interrupted by nature to further advance.

"How are we going to get up here, Frank?" inquired the slender dressed cavalier. "I see no path for a horse up these cliffs."

"We haven't struck the right spot," said the cowboy. "We'll have to ride along the base of the rocks till we find an opening. Strike to the left, kids. The Colony's coming through here."

snowhar, and whar a river comes, surely three fellers kin
 S.

Setting the action to the word, the little gray mare was turned round to the left, and the party rode south.

The tall, towering cliffs, rugged and picturesque in outline, towered on their right hand, as they rode along. Bushes clung here and there in crevices of the rock. It seemed as if a great wall had been built by giants of old, a bar farther westward. At the top of the rocks, in places, a crest of trees appeared to nod over the precipice like the giants themselves prepared to defend their fortress. But, before they had ridden very long, the keen eye of old Pete Wilkins descried a **landmark that he was looking for.**

"That it are!" he cried, "that's the old cottonwood as I knowed we'd find, and that's the way up this 'ere better."

About a mile ahead of them the wall of rock seemed to be interrupted for a little space, and at the top of the cliff on the left a tree stood a tall cottonwood, alone, like a sentry on post.

The three companions rode briskly toward the spot and soon discovered an indentation in the line of rock leading upward in a steep slope to the table-land above. It was a rough, steep way enough, and only barely practicable; but hundreds of converging paths from the prairie behind proved that this was the place, where, for hundreds of years, in all probability, the buffaloes, antelope, deer and other wild animals had made their passages on their annual migrations from pasture to pasture. Old Pete put his little mare at the moment without hesitation, and the same little creature scrambled up bravely. As sure-footed as a goat, she seemed to have no difficulty in making her way, where the two thoroughbreds trembled and faltered. They were not used to this kind of work.

The path seemed long and steep, in some places broad and easy, at others so narrow that the riders were forced to dismount and lead their animals. When at last they were about half way, a walling rock wall only interrupted their onward march seemed to forbid further progress.

"What are we to do now, Pete?" asked Little Glimmer, who was the second in the procession.

"Look hyar," answered the mountain man. "If a great chunky boulder has managed to get put here, we kin. The

path must be here somewhere. Yes, and by Jerusalem, here it ar' right up overhead."

And as he spoke he pointed to a faintly-worn track in the side of the rock that climbed up over the great rock in front at an inclination as steep as the roof of a house. The ascent was frightfully dangerous. A mis-step would mean a fall over a sheer precipice on the right, of over a hundred feet, and they were going higher and higher. Old Pete tied the reins of the little mare in a knot, which he hooked into the cranny-piece of her bridle.

"You better do the same, boys," he said. "The horses will feller better, and that'd be nothin to trip 'em up. Now then, fellers, come ahead."

And slinging his rifle on his back, the old hunter began the ascent. It was steep enough to require the aid of hands as well as feet, and as the rock grew steeper it also grew narrower, till, as the summit was reached at last, a path about two feet in breadth appeared, leading forward on a level. At one side of this path rose a wall of rock standing away but very slightly from the perpendicular. At the other side, far away the sheer precipice. Old Pete walked forward after a glance back for his mare. The plucky little creature had followed him, step by step, and stood beside him. Little Gilmore was almost at the top, his boy there clung close on his heels.

The old hunter walked forward briskly. The path was amply broad enough for a man, but a close fit for a horse. The three companions followed it, however, for about a hundred yards in safety, when it began to rise again and made a turn around the immense wall of rock to the left. The rock itself intercepted the view of the pass from the two men in the rear, and they saw the old hunter advance to the corner of the rock and look around it before returning.

Instantly he struck back. As if by common consent the rest halted. Gilmore and Weston instinctively catching their rifles, and their suspicions were confirmed by seeing Pete doing the same. The veteran hunter turned around. There was such a perfect stillness on the mountain side, that every word could be heard.

"Now then, fellers," he said, "that's a party of Comanches

ascend down the pass and they'll be hyar in about five minutes. We ain't far from the top of the pass, and the varmints ain't quite all in. Now then you must come up to the front the best way you kin, and we must kill every damned Comanche of the crowd. If we don't—good-by Mustang!"

"How many are there, Peter?" inquired Little Gilmore, coolly.

As he spoke he examined his rifle with the same coolness as if he were going to shoot at a target. Frank Weston, whose first inclination it was into Indian-fighting, felt that strange beating of the heart which sudden danger always produces on men unaccustomed to it, however brave naturally.

He felt his hands tremble as he handled his rifle, but the terror of nature did not prevent his feeling anxious to go to the front.

Old Peter Wilkins answered Gilmore's question.

"There's about twenty on Comanche war as I kin tell, but whether they see us or not I ain't sartin. Come, hurry up and get to the front. Scramble over the murr', Gil. Come, Frank."

Little Gilmore made no reply save to place his hands on the murr's crup and vault into the saddle, where he stood up for a moment and then leaped clear over her head, landing on his feet by Wilkins.

Frank Weston came forward more cautiously. It was a very narrow business pushing the two horses on that narrow ledge. He crept along on the outside, however, holding on by the horse's leg as he passed. It was a far more dangerous way in fact, but it looked less hazardous, and the younger Texan was not used to this kind of work. He succeeded in passing safely, and the three companions stood together, shut out from view of the approaching Indians by the jutting buttress of rock.

"Now then, Peter!" said Peter, "the path's wide enough to hold them almost round the corner. We must get ready, and remember that if we can't shoot we must have a couple of hands there, or we'll lose the best rifle in the crowd."

And without another word the three passed boldly round the edge of the rock and found themselves in full view of a most remarkable scene.

As Pete had said, the path grew broader at once, after turning the rock. It was broad enough for a horse-man to ride with ease and comfort, though not enough for two abreast. At about a quarter of a mile farther it appeared to follow the descent to the prairie that they knew to be below. On this path, level and smooth as a newly-laid road, a long line of Indians was advancing at a walk, quite unsuspecting of danger.

The sight of the three white men appeared to petrify them for a moment. Then they halted, and began loading their weapons, all in a hurry.

There were about twenty-five, all told. Their weapons were mostly bows and arrows, but several rifles were to be seen.

So much Weston could tell in the hurried glance he snatched before the fight commenced.

A shrill yell burst from the Indians, and the foremost began to gallop forward to attack the three strangers. Then Pete stood out the first on the road as well as an iron horse. Slowly and deliberately he raised the short, heavy cannon to a level; paused for one instant; and the next, a splendid red flash was seen. The first of the Indian horses reared up in the air and fell over the precipice on the outside, bearing with him the rider. The second Indian checked his horse, appalled at the sight, and there was a hoarse cry of mounted savages on the narrow pass, undecided to charge or retreat.

Little Gilmore it was, who now exhibited his wonderful skill in rapid shooting. He stepped up alongside of the white hunter, who had lowered his rifle to reverse the horse. Without saw him raise the short rifle quickly, and, then it was "Click!" came the report, and the last Indian on the line fell from his horse. Without lowering the rifle the gunner reversed the lever once more, and the second shot struck the horse beside its master, blocking up the path for escape to the others.

The Comanches were in a tight place. Their favorite tactics of holding behind their horses was useless. The path was too narrow to turn.

Now came the flanking of rifles from the midst of the In-

dians, and several bullets whizzed among our little party. But the use of two men, armed with repeaters, is far more rapid and deadly than that of a dozen with old flint lock rifles, even as the Indians proved. No one was wounded by the first volley, hastily and nervously delivered.

The first shot scarcely decided the question.

Crack! crack! crack! followed the rifles of Pete Williams and Little Glimmere, one after the other. At each shot a man fell or yelled with pain. They could hear the dull *clunk clunk* of the bullets tearing into human flesh. The Indians held the other, and I was held, by our frontier. The rifle men, armed with repeaters, trying to turn in the narrow pass, and shoot to pieces some of the Indians. They threw down their guns and held up their hands for mercy, which they obtained not.

The pass was kept up without interruption by the old hunter and little Glimmere, but their bullets were empty, and a volley of arrows shot down the Indians in the pass. Then it was that the big warrior, who sprang up from the crowd and caught the hand and horse, where he had crept in, and held up the pass with the swiftness of a deer.

Our big and Little Glimmere's pistol, *crack! crack! crack!* went the reports, as fast as he could pull the trigger. But in vain. It was beyond the range of the weapon.

"A hundred curses!" cried the giant, stamping his foot with rage. "Why haven't I shot or shot in my side? He'll get off as sure as fate."

Pete Williams had not fired in a day yet. The other would not shoot any more, but he held that the foe was his thoughts before it was all over.

Now he raised his rifle, aimed as steadily as an expert would be him, and sent a conical bullet whizzing after the runaway fugitive. But his aim was defeated by his own hand. The man started, and ran harder than ever. He was within a few yards of the top of the pass, already.

"Come on the side," cried Glimmere, at this moment, "I can fetch him."

Pete pulled the weapon instantly, and the other raised it to his shoulder, just as the fugitive gained the summit of the pass. The flying Indian was just leaping over the crest of the

cliff when Gilmore fired again. They saw him clip his hand to his belt again, but whether he was hurt or not, no one could tell, for the next instant he had disappeared.

"Down the hill," exclaimed Old Pete; "the varmints get off. We must catch him, fellows. If we don't he'll give us trouble yet. Come ahead."

The hunters moved to the scene of the slaughter. It was all blacked up with corpses of men and horses. Several of the latter remained alive, but almost all were killed, and two were fallen over the precipice. How to pass the living animals was the question.

Pete solved it quickly. Coming to the first dead horse, which lay with his head over the precipice, he called to his companions to help him, and the three together soon carried him over. They proceeded in the same way with all the corpses, human and equine, till they had left nothing but the living horses.

What to do with these was the question.

It was easy enough to shove them over the precipice, and to get rid of them. The poor beasts, palpitating with terror, would have been easily disposed of.

But even old Pete, hardened by custom to deeds of blood, felt a little such a thing unnecessarily cruel.

"I guess we kin turn 'em round, if we try hard," he said; "and they might be useful at a pinch. Let's try 'em anyway."

And after a little coaxing, one by one, the Indian horses were backed against the walls, and raised short round on their hind feet till they stood in the opposite direction.

"And now, fellows," said the old hunter, kindly, "put your horses as quick as ye kin, and arter that run away over."

And as he spoke, he lay on the foremost horse of the file, and jumped up the post as hard as he could stir. The other horses followed like a flock of sheep, and all round of the American reached the top of the post in a matter of two minutes. When they saw lower than, instead of at the same level of prairie.

The cliffs up which they had come, appeared very low either side as far as could be seen. Behind their backs, they continued in view of the vast prairie they had just quitted, unfolding into little swells, dotted with dark masses of timber,

and variegated with meandering threads of silver, in the different tributaries of the distant Colorado.

Before them again stretched another level plain of waving grass and flowers. They had ascended one of the numerous high land steps, by which Texas descends from the Rocky Mountains to the sea, beginning with the Staked Plains. But the thoughts of the hunters were not much taken up with geography. At the moment they were only anxious to discover the fugitive Indian, whose escape might alarm the tribe, and bring down the whole force of some band of Comanches upon them.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

"Keep back the horses, boys," said Old Pete, hurriedly; and he dug to the ground as he spoke, and began to examine the grass for a trail.

That he soon found it, and that it puzzled him, was evident. He followed it in silence for some distance, when it crossed a small hole, and finally came to the edge of the cliff, where it disappeared.

Old Pete looked over the edge. There was a path, barely perceptible to the eye, down which the fugitive had evidently descended. His track was plainly perceptible. The hunter threw the butt of his rifle on the ground with an oath.

"Well, how to leave him, boys. He's safe by this time, and we can't get time to catch him. We've got to venture the chance and put as many miles between him and us as we can. He can't get no horse, anyway; and a man ain't much on his feet without a horse. Come, fellows, let's go!"

"Do you think it's safe?" inquired Frank Weston; "he may get off and give information, you know."

"And if he does, who cares?" said Pete, dispassionately. "If he tells the whole world, hardly, and we him back home, and if the Comanches do not, if they don't come more nor twenty at a time."

Frank Weston said nothing. He had the common-sense of a hunter, and he did not protest.

So the three hunters left their horses and rode westward. They rode on the horses captured from the Indians, leaving the others; and their own animals were attached to the led horses, being furnished with nothing beyond the saddles.

They were thus kept fresh for the chase ahead of them, when all their energies would be required.

They rode all the afternoon, and halted just before sunset at a spring of water, to which Old Pete directed their march as to an old acquaintance.

After they had stabled out the horses and put in a camp, the hunters discussed their supper with appetite, and talked over the events of the day.

Old Pete Wilkins, formerly one of the most famous hunters around the campfire, was unusually silent tonight. He was smoking at his black pipe in a meditative manner. At last Gilmore turned to him with a question.

"Pete," he said, "what sort of an Indian was that fellow that got away so cleverly from us, do you suppose? It seemed to me that he looked and moved like some one I've seen."

Pete Wilkins took a long draw at his pipe before he answered. Then he said, in the midst of a thick cloud of smoke:

"Twarn't an Injun, at all."

Gilmore sprang to his feet as if he had been stung.

"How do you know?"

"Hed boots," said the grizzled hunter, hoarsely, and he smoked harder than ever.

"Then it was Tom Austin," cried the gambler, exclaiming, "It was he, and I have allowed him to escape. Pete Wilkins, you're no friend of mine, or you'd have told me before!"

And he looked so savage, that Weston, keeping the desperate character of their business, anticipated his remark.

But the old hunter remained perfectly composed, and waited till Gilmore had calmed a little before he spoke.

"If yer want ter know why I don't tell yer now, Mr. Gilmore, I'll tell yer. I knowed as how there was some one as soon as I set eyes on his track. But he had his plans as good as made, for the hole cut in deep. The yer had eyes yer own. And I'd promised the boys young Tom and I wouldn't say nuthin' or I'd tell 'em set eyes on the Black Mustang. I knowed that if I told yer both, yer'd be startin' off after him, down there, and he'd be able to beat yer down with our hatchin' of him. He's only one white man, all alone, and the chances are as he'll starve to death. He had no

rifle. I seen him drop it in his fust skeer. He ain't used to the peraries, and he kurn't do any harm to us. Are yer satisfied? I know yer kin shoot both on us, Bill Gilmore, afore we could draw a pistol on yer. If yer do it, how'll yer git back to the settlements? Yer don't know how ter hunt and yer mou't starve afore ye got thar. Set down, and don't be makin' a show of yerself. When we've cotedhed the Black, I'm ready for a turn at Tom Austin."

Little Gilmore stood irresolute during this speech. His handsome features, mild and effeminate at ordinary times, were drawn into a heavy frown. When Pete had finished, he took his seat by the fire, in silence for a moment. At last he turned.

"You were right, Wilkins, and I was wrong," he said, quietly. "I apologize to you and Mr. Weston."

The three shook hands and resumed their smoking in peace and harmony.

CHAPTER V.

THE GAME SPRUNG.

WITH the progress of our party for the next two days we shall not trouble the reader. They fared better than might have been expected, and discovered no Indian sign. They were now on the southern side of the Staked Prairie, where the Comanches but rarely penetrate. As the buffalo at this time of the year had gone to the more northern prairies for the summer, old Pete announced his opinion to be that their party would be practically undisturbed.

On the evening of the second day they halted at a spring at the foot of a second range of cliffs. These formed another of those vast steps that mark the eastern border of the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Madre. A delicious little brook, whose waters had worn a deep ravine in the side of the cliff, made a little pond for itself at the foot of the step. A *mote* of live oak timber, with its usual drapery of Spanish moss, formed a pleasant shelter for their camp.

But Pete Wilkins, ever cautious, would not allow a large fire to be kept up at night.

"One fire kin be seen as fur as a hull wagon-train," said the sagacious hunter. "Thar's only three on us, arter all said and done; and thof 'sixteen' are a pretty piece to shoot with, he won't keep our horses from bein' stole, ef so be as them durned Comanches ketches sight on 'em."

So the fire, which was lighted before the sun went down, with dry sticks that made no smoke, was banked for the night, and thus gave no light. The horses, which had been hobbled and fed before dark, were brought into a natural corral in the center of the little *arroyo*, where a barricade of poles, stretched from tree to tree, rendered them secure against being stampeded.

But the precaution of standing guard was never neglected by our three travelers. Every night was divided into three parts, and they took their regular turns of guard duty.

But on this night in Camp Repose, as romantic Frank named it, they were undisturbed by any alarms; and our hero, who had the last watch, saw the east showing red in the first flush of coming day, before any thing happened.

It was then, in the faint light of early dawn, that Frank looked up the ravine, at the foot of which lay the *arroyo*. The clatter of a stone, loosened and rolling down the bank, announced the approach of something living.

Half-hidden by the bushes that fringed the course of the little brook, the young Texan perceived the head and neck of a horse. The light was too uncertain as yet to identify the animal. As Frank gazed, the eastern horizon blushed rosy, and the light increased.

The horse came down at a bold trot, quite unconscious of the presence of strangers. As it came nearer and nearer, young Weston's heart beat violently with emotion. What if it should be the very object of their search, the far famed Black Mustang?

He did not dare to stir from his post, for fear of alarming the animal. He stood under one of the trees at the edge of the *arroyo*, from whence he could command a view of the stream and the pool.

While he gazed, a bright red glow suddenly appeared the

fringe of bushes at the crest of the line of precipice. It came stealing down the face of the gray rocks, lighting up every little tuft of bushes, and revealing every crevice. Frank Weston strained his eyes to watch the approaching mustang.

A mustang it undoubtedly was, for it bore no rider. So much Frank could see in spite of the intervening bushes. It had disappeared now behind a thick clump of taller shrubs, which completely concealed it. But the Texan could still hear the clatter of its hoofs on the rocks. He glanced around at his companions.

Little Gilmore was just unrolling himself from his *serape* or *puncho*, and Frank feared that he might disturb the approaching horse. He raised his hand with a warning gesture. Gilmore nodded his comprehension and sat still.

Frank turned again to his watch, and involuntarily started with admiration at the sight that met his view.

The glow of sunlight had swept down all the face of the cliff, and the level rays cast his own shadow on the pool and the bank beyond.

Standing out on a smooth green knoll, which glistened like a bank of diamonds with sunlit dewdrops, and within twenty feet of the pool, was the renowned Black Mustang!

There was no doubting it. His likeness was too thoroughly impressed on Weston's mind to be mistaken.

There he stood, in full view, a perfect picture of equine beauty. He had come to drink at his accustomed pool, and something had startled him. He stood with his head slightly turned, his ears pricked up, his large dark eyes gleaming like stars. His mane, just lifted by the early breeze, flowed down below his knees in front, and his tail swept the ground behind. The head of the Black was very small, and tapered away to the muzzle. The forehead was broad, and the ears very short and sharp. His neck, as he stood half front, appeared to be remarkably arched, and his chest was broad and deep. But his legs, both before and behind, were models of symmetry, and tapered away to hoofs hardly larger than those of a mare. His color was the most intense jetty black, shining in bluish reflection.

Frank Weston stood dumb with admiration, gazing at the graceful creature as it stood suspended on the knoll. One fore-

foot was raised and bent, like a dog at a point, as the mustang gazed wistfully from side to side. Finally it appeared to be satisfied that all was right, as it came forward to the pool, stooped its graceful head and drank copiously, thrusting in its head up to the eyes.

Frank felt a touch on his arm as he gazed, and Little Gilmore and Pete Wilkins stood beside him. They had crept up unobserved, while Weston was absorbed in his watch; and the three together enjoyed the sight.

The Black Mustang, after drinking his fill, began to paw and splash in the water, after the wont of horses. The noise echoed up the narrow gorge as he splashed, and aroused the attention of the other horses in the *motte*. One of them neighed loudly. It was the little gray mare of Pete Wilkins.

Instantly the Black stopped his splashing, and stood still and erect in the water. He listened for an instant, and then cast up his head and uttered a deep, powerful neigh in answer.

The horses in the *motte* replied in chorus, and the Black leaped out of the water.

He came trotting around the edge of the pool, with high, proud step, calling to the horses within, and without seeing the three hunters.

"What shall we do, Pete?" whispered Frank, anxiously.

"Kurn't do nothin'," replied the hunter. "Keep still and don't skeer him. Melbe we'll git a chance."

"If we could only get to the horses without frightening him," said Gilmore, "we'd have a good start, and might run him down."

He had hardly said the words when the Black Mustang passed close in front, not twenty feet from them, and started to one side with a loud snort.

"All up, boys," said Old Pete. And to verify his prediction, the black swerved off, whirled around on his hind feet, and the next minute was off like a shot. The leaps that he took were perfectly amazing, and such as Frank Weston had never seen equaled on a race course. In ten seconds the alarmed stallion was at the foot of the ravine, and at the other side of the pool. There he halted, and stood looking back doubtfully.

"If we ever get as near that 'ere horse ag'in," observed Pete,

"it'll be a darned wonderful thing. If we'd only knowed when he war a-comin' we might 'a' be'n ready."

"I'm going to make a trial, anyhow," said Frank, quietly. "We shall never get such a chance again. He won't come here to drink in a herry. Follow me with the rest of the traps, boys. I'm going to try to run him down, if he'll only stay there long enough."

"Look out yer don't let him see yer," observed Pete. "He'll be off ef yer do."

Frank's only answer was to slip away to his saddle behind the trees and make for the corral.

The two watchers by the edge of the *molle* could see the Black Mustang plainly, as he stood at the opposite side of the pool, undecided whether to advance or retreat.

The mare kept whinnying from the corral, and the wild stallion answered her. Now he would make a few steps forward, and then bound away up the hill in alarm. He had caught sight of the hunters when he passed them; but, as nothing more suspicious appeared, he seemed undecided what to do. His curiosity was excited, and it seemed likely to cost him dear. He was not over three hundred feet from the *molle*, and every moment increased his danger.

Affairs stood thus for about ten minutes, during which the wild stallion maintained his position by the pool. Then came the sudden clatter of iron-shod hoofs, and the next moment they saw the figure of Frank Weston, stripped to his shirt-sleeves, without his boots, and bending over the neck of the mighty chestnut race-horse, which he rode at full speed, and bareheaded. He was freed from every superfluous thing, and bareheaded, accoutered for a race in earnest. He held in his hand the coils of his trusty lasso, and emerged from the side of the *molle* at about a hundred feet nearer to the Black.

"Well done, Frank," muttered Pete, as he saw the rush of the old horse.

The General was worthy his reputation. He started with a bound like a skyrocket, and, before the wild horse had recovered from his surprise he had closed the gap between them to about a hundred feet. Then away went the Black Mustang, as fast as he could tear up the steep ravine, and Frank, on the General, after him.

Up the narrow path they went, the stones clattering down as they spurned them aside, the black leaping like an antelope, the tall chestnut following with immense strides.

The watchers in the *mottle* saw them strain up the ravine, climb the crest, and disappear, the wild horse first, the chestnut in a few seconds after. Then all was still on the side of the cliffs. The few frightened birds that had fled in dismay from the path of the hurrying chargers had settled down again once more to their search for food, and the prairie was still behind them.

"Guess we'd better saddle up and be off," said the old hunter. "That boy ain't fit to take keer of hisself on the prairies, he ain't. He'll git lost, as sure as a gun, ef we don't look out."

Gilmore offered no objection, and the two saddled their horses at once, and set off up the path. They found the saddle and other horse-equipments of young Westen, along with his weapons and outer garments, all lying in a heap, where the impatient youth had dropped them, to lighten himself as much as possible. All he had taken with him was a snaffle bridle, a surcingle, and his lasso. He had abandoned all his weapons but his knife. Old Pete grumbled as he saddled one of the captured horses and piled the arms of the young man upon it.

Then they started, each man leading two horses, and in about ten minutes more had reached the top of the cliffs. They took a hasty breakfast, as they rode along, of jerked beef, of which they had found an abundance packed on the Indian horses, proving that the riders must have been on the war-path at the time.

When they arrived at the top, another apparently boundless prairie stretched before them, level as a chess-board, and without a tree to be seen. The waving ocean of green grass only terminated in the horizon. Far away in the distance they could see the black horse and his pursuer, still at full speed, and several miles off.

The relative distance seemed to be less than when they started, and sometimes they thought the chestnut was coming up with the wild horse! But then again the black would "put on a spurt," in racing parlance, and draw away from the race horse.

Pete Wilkins set spurs to the horse he rode, one of the captured ones, and set off at a gallop after the retreating pair, followed by his own little mare and another horse. Gilmore rode beside him, leading two horses likewise, and the two galloped on, at the usual stretching canter of the mustang, endeavoring to keep the game in sight.

But they found this no easy matter. Fast and untiring as were their horses, they were heavily loaded. The Mexican saddle, ordinarily used on the prairies, is a heavy, cumbersome piece of horse furniture. Add to this the weight of blankets, arms and ammunition, and the store of dried beef, and it will be seen that the weight mounts up.

The two horses in front, far superior to the others at any time, were unincumbered, Frank Weston being a light weight himself, and capable of enough jockeyship to neutralize that.

So that the two hunters, with the main body of the little party, were gradually left further and farther behind, while the chase slowly disappeared from their eyes.

The sun rose slowly up in the heavens; the pursuit never slackened for an instant. Gilmore and Pete rode steadily on, still losing ground however, till hot noon lay on all the prairies and the breeze had sunk away to an intense still heat.

"Tain't no use, Gil," said the old hunter, at last, pulling up his reeking horse to a walk. "We kurn't keep up, and tain't no use a-killin' the horses. We'll travel on steady, and catch 'em afore night. No horse as ever stopped kin run all day."

And they dismounted to change horses, after which they rode on, but not at such a rapid pace.

The Black Mustang and his partner had disappeared, swallowed up in the immensity of the green prairie.

They were all alone.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DESERT QUEEN.

Let us return to the chase of the wild horse.

When Frank Weston started on his pursuit, he had no thought of any thing but the Black Mustang. An all absorbing desire that the creature should not slip out of his hands without a fair chase possessed him. He felt, also, a well-founded confidence in the powers of his own horse. Many a stake had "The General" won for Weston's father, on the race-course at New Orleans, in the exhausting four-mile race. The old horse had won renown even in his struggles with the kings of the turf. He had pushed the celebrated horse Tennessee to the finest burst he had ever made in point of time, and was by no means now too old to run. He had passed his prime by one or two years, but he still was in good trim. Frank knew that the Black had just filled his stomach with water, which would tell upon him severely in a hard chase. He stripped himself for the race, tied a handkerchief tightly round his waist, knotted the end of his trusty lasso into the sarcingle which he strained around the General's body, and then rode cautiously out to a point of the neck from whence he made his dash.

He timed it well, and scrambled up the steep ravine at full speed, hanging on the mane of the General, and at some places almost within lassoing length of the chase. But the latter managed to keep ahead of him to the top of the cliff, when he gained some distance on the level before the chestnut could follow.

Once on the level prairie, it was a fair race. Frank looked to the General, and the gallant old horse stretched himself out in that magnificent stride, of yore the admiration of the Metairie course.

The General was over sixteen hands high, and his stride covered over twenty-feet of ground. The Black Mustang was between fourteen and fifteen hands, his stride quick and short.

At the commencement of the race, at the top of the hill, the wild horse had a start of full two hundred feet. Frank depended on the General to close the gap. He determined to press the mustang to the utmost while he could. He knew that the "staying powers" of the latter were equal to, if not superior to his own horse's endurance.

The General laid down to his work like the thoroughbred he was. As he warmed into his stride, after the first half-mile, he seemed fairly to fly. Frank almost lost his breath, and could hardly see, so rapidly did they rush through the air. But, at last, he grew more accustomed to the pace; and there was the Black Mustang, only a trifle nearer. The General hardly seemed to have gained a foot.

The Black was still speeding as rapidly as ever, and Frank, for the first time, began to feel a doubt of his success. The first mile passed, had not gained him over a couple of lengths, **certainly.**

He pressed the General with his legs, and shouted to him, encouragingly. The faster the Black Mustang went, the greater grew the young Texan's anxiety to possess him. A horse that could keep on even terms with his own race-horse without the stimulus inspired by a rider, must be a horse worth having. The General, in his second mile, seemed to go faster than ever. In his best days at the Metairie course he had never made better speed. Slowly he began to draw up to the Black.

The latter, as the chase pressed him, lost much ground by a habit common to pursued animals. He turned round his head every now and then, to see how near his pursuer was. At such moments Frank Weston, pricking the General with the point of his bowie knife, incited him to tremendous efforts. And at every turn of the head, the Black Mustang lost ground. He stumbled once, and before he could recover himself, the chase had gained several lengths.

But Frank perceived with growing desperation, that when the Black put forth all his speed, he could keep the General at a stand, and even creep away from him.

Still the mustang lost so much ground by his frequent turns of the head, that Frank arrived within about two horse lengths, **after a chase of several hours.**

We say a chase of several hours.

Does the reader realize what a chase of several hours is? A chase beginning at full speed, kept up for hour after hour, at a laboring gallop till the staggering animals can hardly reel along?

So kept on the wild race between the race-horse of the Metairie and the Black Mustang.

The sun rose higher and higher in the heavens, and hotter and hotter grew the day. The breeze died away and the tall green grass stood erect in stiff rows. The vast green plain around, level and boundless as the ocean, was as still as death. Not a bird twittered, not a cricket chirped. The only sound that Frank Weston could hear was the painful breathing of the two gallant chargers, both white with foam and hardly able to keep up their slow, staggering canter.

At the tremendous pace at which they had come, miles seemed nothing. They had gone over twenty miles in the first hour, and since that time had kept it up at nearly the same pace.

But the third hour settled the matter for both horses. Frank felt that the General could not stand the pace much longer. Game old horse as he was, sixty miles in three hours had been too much for him. He kept along in a labored canter. But his ears were hanging; his head was low. It took all of Frank's attention to keep him from falling.

The Black Mustang was no longer black. The white foam made him gray. He labored frightfully, and was almost exhausted. But he no longer looked back.

Frank himself was tired, but not to the extent of the two horses. He was frantically eager to win the race, even if it killed both horses. He was only conscious of the one desire, to come up with the Black Mustang. The sun beat on his bare head. He was choked with thirst. He longed incessantly for a draught of water. But he felt determined to win the race, or die with the General.

At last came a crisis. The country suddenly changed its aspect. About a mile ahead Weston perceived a growth of timber. He knew that it must be the head-waters of the Colorado that were indicated by the trees.

"Go along, General! go, good horse! gallant horse! never

General! One more effort, and the Black is ours!" he cried; and at the sound of his voice and the sight of the timber ahead, the gallant old horse seemed to pluck up some spirit. He closed rapidly on the Mustang. The latter, hearing the approach of the great chestnut horse, turned his head despairingly. That turn was his ruin. Not seeing where he went, he tripped over a hard tuft of grass, the remnant of last year's fires. He stumbled and fell on his knees. Before he could quite recover himself, the chestnut was within three lengths of him.

And now Frank Weston trembles with nervous excitement. He hardly dares believe in his luck. "He has arrived within lasso length of the famous Black Mustang! That full drink of water proved the ruin of the wild stallion. It distressed him in his running. And the General was the fastest horse in all Texas. But he never would have run down the Black without the slight advantage he had.

Now Frank gathers up the coils of his lasso with care.

He must not miss this time. He will never get such another chance. He whirls the noose around his head, shouts to the General encouragingly, and the next moment the long spiral rings of black horse-hair are whirling through the air.

Hurrah! He sees the noose falling, falling. It seems an age before it settles. But at last it is down and on the neck of the Black Charger, and Weston pulls up.

The chase is over!

The General falls back on his haunches, as he feels the bit. The black cord tightens and strains. Then it relaxes, as the wild charger, caught and strangled, paws the air for one wild moment. He rears up, and falls over backward on the ground, and the Black Mustang is captured!

Then Frank Weston leaps from his own horse in haste, and runs to the fallen steed. He knows how quickly he would strangle, if left alone now. He quickly takes the handkerchief from his waist, and binds the eyes of the Black; and then loosens the lasso from his neck. He fastens a knot around the lower jaw of the wild stallion, and permits him to rise. Then he looks at the General. The noble old horse stands with drooping head and trembling limbs, completely run up. The Black Mustang is equally exhausted. The her-

weather and the chase have been too much for both of them.

The young Texan, for the first time, looked around him. Not a hundred yards off was the grove of trees that he had noticed toward the end of his chase. The black charger had been heading toward his secret haunt, when he fell exhausted.

The Texan felt puzzled what to do. He feared to take the horses to the water at once, lest the draught might prove fatal, exhausted and overheated as both animals were.

It was almost equally dangerous to leave them out in the sun, when both were ready to drop.

While he was thus doubtful, the sound of hoofs struck on his ear, advancing at a gallop.

Frank Weston started in dismay. For the first time he realized the imprudence of his solitary ride, unarmed save with a bowie-knife. Flight was his only resource, if attacked by Indians. And how could he flee, when his horse was used up?

All these thoughts rushed through his mind, as he listened to the beat of hoofs, and before he turned to see who was coming. In another minute the stranger was beside him.

Frank Weston stared with amazement. The new-comer was a woman.

Yes, a woman, and a gloriously beautiful woman at that.

Her figure was tall and slender; her face possessed that proud and peculiar beauty never found out of the equine type; very rare, but inexpressibly wonderful and exquisite when it is met with. It was very dark, and lighted with a pair of black eyes, as keen as those of an eagle, while long plaits of black hair were coiled around her head, decorated with feathers.

This maiden, slender and agile as a deer, clear-eyed and as vigilant as a hawk, was dressed as an Indian princess, and rode a splendid mustang, of the exact color and markings of a jaguar. The same golden tawny hide exhibited the same elegantly arranged rosettes of velvety black, as in the skin of American felines. She bore in her hand a long cut-throat razor, and Weston stared, for the point seemed to be of solid silver.

The bridle bit and stirrups of the horse were of the same precious metal, and gold and silver ornaments covered the fair figure of the rider.

And yet the material of her garments was only buck-skin, and aside from the ornaments she might have been an ordinary Indian warrior from her dress.

The beautiful Amazon galloped up to the Texan, and halted her horse before him. She gazed upon him fixedly for a moment, and Weston returned the gaze with interest. He had never seen such a beautiful creature in his life.

The fair Morana, "*Charmante Gabrielle*," as he had often termed her, seemed to fade from his sight in a moment and be forgotten in the new beauty.

She, on her part, was not so much fascinated. Poor Frank, with his unkempt hair falling over his forehead, his face striped in irregular patterns with dust and sweat, in a dirty shirt and short leather breeches, with bare legs, was by no means the pattern of a gay Lothario. He was simply a dirty-looking rascallin, with a three days' beard on his chin.

At last Frank's astonishment found vent in words:

"Who are you, in heaven's name?" he said.

The beautiful Amazon smiled. Her lips were of the most brilliant red, and she showed a row of small white teeth like pearls. But she shook her head at the same time to show that she did not understand.

She pointed to the black horse, who stood with his eyes covered, trembling and panting, and to Frank's surprise, addressed him in French:

"*Vous devez avoir un cheval merveilleux, monsieur, pour poursuivre notre cheval si vite sans succès.*"

(You must have had a marvelous horse, sir, to pursue our black horse with success.)

Weston was a good French scholar, and answered without hesitation.

"It has been a hard chase, mademoiselle; and I fear that it will be the death of one or both of them."

"Nay," she answered, leaping to the ground, as she spoke; "they are too good, both of them, to die without help. I will help them."

From a small pouch which hung at her girdle, she quickly produced a little flask of gold, and a piece of dry spongy moss. She poured out from the flask, a clear yellow fluid, with the remarkable odor of brandy, and saturated the moss there-

with. Then she went to the side of the chestnut horse, forced open his mouth, and washed it with the sponge. She repeated the operation, watching him carefully. As the exhausted animal felt the stimulus of the brandy, a magical change came over him. He pricked up his ears, elevated his head once more, and whinnied in low tones of gratitude.

"Take him down to drink," said the Amazon, briefly; and she turned her attention to the black horse.

Going to the side of her own horse, which was saddled only with the skin of a grizzly bear, she took from where they were attached to the surcingle a pair of hobles. In an instant she had adjusted these on the forelegs of the Black Mustang so as to secure him from escaping; when she proceeded to doctor him as she had done the other horse.

Meanwhile Frank Weston led the gallant old General down to the belt of timber that he had seen before. He found it to be a grove of trees of every variety, hiding the banks of a beautiful little stream, that rushed brawling along over a bed of white pebbles, about six feet in breadth. The General plunged down the bank to the water, and dashing in, he made amends for his thirst with a deep draught. But Weston would not allow him to drink much before he pulled him away by main force, and rode up the bank to find his prize. He met the beautiful Amazon leading the black stallion down to the stream, and riding her own jaguar-like charger.

Weston was wonderfully puzzled over this enigmatical being, alone in the heart of the Llano Estacado, (Staked Plain). Who was she, and how did she come there? Speaking excellent French, dressed like an Indian warrior, and wearing gold and silver ornaments that a princess might envy. Tomahawk and spear, the very points of the arrows in her quiver, all gold and silver.

She seemed to notice his surprise, for she smiled as if amused. She spoke to him kindly, saying:

"You wish to know who I am, and how I live. Come and see. My father will welcome you, and so will Eulalie. That is myself. Eulalie St. Pierre. Come."

Wondering and amazed, the young Texan followed her down the stream. As they progressed, the deep roar of a waterfall became audible.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRAIRIE HERMIT.

ETIALIE went forward along the banks of the stream, leading the wild horse. Thoroughly exhausted as the latter was, and fettered with hobbles, he could offer but little resistance, to the fresh and vigorous stallion of the young Amazon.

As they went, the roar of the waterfall increased every moment, and Weston perceived, right ahead of them, an opening in the otherwise level prairie, on the steep sides of which black rocks were visible, under the thick layer of loam that formed the prairie surface. The nearer they came, the plainer was the existence of a deep chasm, cut out of the prairie by the stream. Precipitous and abrupt, it sunk away out of the smooth plain with startling suddenness.

A miniature Niagara had been formed by the same agencies as those which make that giant cascade. Only, instead of one fall of great height, our hero, looking over the edge, could perceive a succession of white cataracts, throwing up showers of spray in the air, and ending in black still pools, or flowing on over broad, white platforms of quartz rock, till another ledge made another fall.

The sides of this natural phenomenon were of quartz and other primitive rocks, perpendicular, and hollowed out by the wear of the water into recesses and bold battlements, that reminded you of the aisles of a cathedral.

A narrow path—evidently an artificial help to nature—wound down by one side of the fall.

The young Amazon dismounted from her own horse, and on her giving him a light blow, the noble creature trotted off down the path as docile as a deer. Etialie followed, with the end of the lasso in her hand, the other end of which was hitched around the lower jaw of the Black Master.

The stallion, being hobbled, was unable to resist escape, and followed his fair leader down the path without much difficulty. Weston came last, leading the General. The old horse, like

the Black, was pretty well stiffened up after his tremendous exertions. He stepped along with much more liveliness than might have been expected, however, and the sweat had dried on his fleet limbs, already. He tried to pick at the grass as he went, and looked as if he could recover from his exhausting race. The good brandy had done wonders for him.

They went down the narrow path, which grew more wild and picturesque every moment. Sometimes it wound under over-arching rocks, from which curtains of diamond drops fell like a veil outside the path, as some baby stream trickled over the precipice above. Now it emerged on a broad, flat platform of rock, where the stream spread itself out, broad and shallow, kissing their feet as it passed; while the cathedral-like cliffs made a solemn amphitheater around them, that echoed to the clatter of horse-hoofs. Again the gorge narrowed to a space not ten feet wide, where a rushing waterfall tumbled down into a deep, black gulf, a hundred feet below. Here a strong bridge of trunks of trees had been constructed, over which the little train marched with perfect facility, to descend into a second broad, solemn amphitheater, by a winding road in some places only two feet wide.

But all the narrowest places had been widened, for the marks of tools on the rocks were perceptible, and the path was easily practicable for a mounted man.

Weston judged that they must have descended at least three hundred feet into the bowels of the earth, having passed through two gorges, when a third narrow gorge appeared before them, beyond which he could see the light of the sky.

His companion advanced boldly into the narrow passage. The great walls of rock approached till they almost touched above, while below the passage widened enough to let the stream pass. The path they trod was a ledge of rock, at whose level the stream had formerly rested awhile, sweeping out a softer bed of rock beneath. It overhung the stream for several feet; and the water rushed along beneath, black and rapid as an arrow. A platform of tree-trunks had been thrown over the narrowest part of the chasm, where the ledge on each side was only just broad enough to sustain the timber.

They passed through, and Frank Weston uttered a cry of delight, as he gazed upon the scene before him.

A fourth natural amphitheater, but of much larger dimensions than the other three, was before him.

It measured about a quarter of a mile across, by about a mile in length. The little stream, that had led such a wild life among the rocks, spread itself out into a diminutive lake or pond, of several acres in extent; and then rippled and meandered tranquilly through banks of grass of emerald green, till it disappeared in a narrow gorge beyond, whose perpendicular walls cut the sky abruptly.

The sides of the valley were heavily clothed with timber. Oak, maple, hickory, chestnut, walnut, and the white-blossomed dog-wood, formed a shaly border; a setting for the tranquil picture in the valley.

From among the thick foliage by the edge of the valley, curled up a thin blue smoke, that told of human habitation. The gable end of a white stone cottage, neat as a Massachusetts school house, shone out from the trees. In front stretched a field of ten or twelve acres in extent, planted with Indian corn, and smaller fields of wheat and oats stretched beside it.

A neat fence, rustic and picturesque, inclosed the whole. On the green grass outside fed a flock of sheep, and several beautifully spotted mustangs grazed loose near them.

"This is our little Paradise, monsieur," said the beautiful Eulalie. "How do you like it?"

"It is beautiful, charming," said Weston, enthusiastically.

"And what is best, it is unknown to all the world," she said; "only this black horse has ever entered our valley before, and the Indians never stray near here. The stream falls over a sheer precipice in your gorge, and no one can enter, but by this path alone, and we can destroy this in ten minutes. But see, I must call my father to welcome you."

Eulalie Saint Pierre lifted from her side, where it hung by a gold chain, a small bag of silver. She placed it to her lips, and blew a long, shrill call of several notes, repeated three times.

"Wait a moment," she said, smiling.

Another long answer came from the valley, the long sweet notes echoing from rock to rock.

The figure of a man appeared on the green before the cottage, and Weston saw several mustangs immediately run up

to him. They seemed to be on excellent terms with each other, horses and man, for when he mounted one of them, without saddle or bridle, the rest followed him, as tame as so many dogs.

Weston watched the arrival of the stranger with much interest. As he approached, he beheld a very tall, slight-built man, long and lean, but hard and muscular, who sat on his horse with the grace of a Grecian bas-relief. His face was of the same high and haughty character as his daughter, and a long, pointed, iron gray beard, flowing to his waist, gave wonderful dignity to his appearance. He was dressed in the ordinary buck-skin shirt and leggings, common to Indians and hunters alike, and totally unarmed.

As he approached, he exhibited traces of surprise and pleasure.

"What have you there, Eulalie?" he cried, in French. "It is not that beautiful black horse, that has sometimes visited our valley? How did you—?"

Then for the first time he noticed Weston, hidden before by an angle of the rock. He started violently, with an angry frown. He clapped his hand to his left side in an instant, with an instinctive readiness that told of the old soldier, and his well-remembered sword.

"Who is that, Eulalie?" he asked, sternly. "How came a stranger here? Is our retreat discovered at last, and shall we have whites and Indians alike profaning the home of Saint Pierre?"

Eulalie threw up her head with a haughty gesture. She was a spoilt child and knew her power.

"I found the poor young man on the prairie, alone and unarmed," she said, proudly. "His horse was nearly dead, but he had just lassoed the Black Mustang. Both horses would have died, and the young man would have starved; for he had nothing but a knife, as you see. So I brought him here to save his life, and I promised him a welcome. Will you not give him one, father?" she suddenly broke off, leaning both hands on the old man's knee, and looking up into his face coaxingly. The cunning wretch knew her power well.

The solitary of the valley allowed his features to relax. But he shook his head doubtfully.

"Imprudent as ever, Eulalie," he said, with a grave smile. "How do we know who this stranger is? He may belong to some party, who will bring half the world down to our oasis, and destroy the little haven of peace where I had hoped to end my days."

Frank Weston had stood silent during all this conversation. He stepped forward now and addressed the old man.

"Have no fears upon that score, monsieur," he said. "I may seem to you a pretty ragged-looking object, but I am a gentleman as you are, and I have seen the world. I have visited your own proud capital, beautiful Paris. On the honor of a gentleman, when I leave this valley, I will never reveal to a soul its existence. I have two friends following me, whom I left this morning in pursuit of this horse. I will lead them away from here if they arrive, and if they chance to discover the path, I will swear them to secrecy."

The old man sat like a statue till Weston had finished.

"You speak like a gallant and honorable man, monsieur," he answered. "I must trust you perforce, and I hold you to your honor. But you must depart when your companions arrive."

"On my honor as a gentleman," said Frank, bowing.

The old gentleman's manner became polite in an instant.

"Mount my horse, monsieur," he said, courteously; "you could not catch any of the others. They are only used to me and my daughter. Your own animal shall be well lodged. It is a noble horse. The black horse, there, has often entered our upper valley, but we never could get him down far enough to cut him off, as we did these."

As he spoke he dismounted from the magnificent animal he rode, a bay dappled with black, retaining it only by a grasp on the long flowing mane. The horse appeared a little alarmed at the stranger, but permitted Frank to mount him. Saint Pierre called to another of the mustangs, who hovered timidly near, and the docile creature came readily up, and allowed himself to be mounted. The three rode down to the cottage, Frank leading the General, while the Black Mustang, still hobbled, followed Eulalie.

Frank did not think it polite to ask any questions, but the stranger saved him the trouble.

"I have been banished from the world here for fifteen long years," he began; "I left my native France, eighteen years ago, when first her throne was polluted by the unprincipled tyrant and robber who styles himself Emperor of the French. That monkey, who aped the military airs of the uncle, whose name he has disgraced, never had my homage. I left Paris the week after the *coup d'état* was accomplished. Tell me, monsieur, are the French people still infatuated about that charlatan? You are fresh from the world."

Frank told him of the events of the last fifteen years as briefly as he could, up to the last *plébiscite*, which had proved the dissatisfaction of French people. It was only a few months before the Prussian war, which so suddenly demolished that fabric of delusions, the Second French Empire.

Saint Pierre laughed bitterly as he heard of the dissatisfaction of the French.

"It serves them right," he said. "They had a republic. Every one was free and equal before the law. What could they want more? But they allowed this impostor to cheat them, and they shouted '*Vive l'empereur!*' They wanted a second Austerlitz. They may get a second Waterloo. Come, monsieur. Enter my humble dwelling."

And, as he spoke, he leaped off his horse before a long, low white cottage, carefully built of rough stone, and that white, shining quartz, in which the amazed Weston could see plentiful specks of virgin gold. The house was thatched with wheat straw, and lighted by what appeared to be glass windows. A closer inspection proved the panes to be flat plates of mica, an excellent substitute.

An air of neatness and taste pervaded every thing, and Weston was more surprised than ever to see commodious out-buildings, and stables with neat rustic fences around every thing.

Saint Pierre smiled at his astonishment.

"Bring your horse into the stable," he said. "You will find every thing comfortable for him. Your prize shall be put into my breaking box, and we will tame him like my own horses in three days. I will tell you how I came here and accumulated what you see, after dinner. You must be hungry, and Jean Baptiste shall attend to your horse."

He called out "Jean Baptiste !" in a low voice, and a little squat negro came out of the stable, who showed all his white teeth in a grin of delighted surprise at the sight of the stranger.

Saint Pierre gave the negro his directions in French, and the latter took the halter of the captured black and led him toward the stable. But the frightened creature, who had recovered his strength somewhat, backed away to the end of the lasso, and refused to budge.

Saint Pierre threw open a large door, and called to one of his own mustangs—a white mare spotted with black. The docile creature trotted up, and entered a large loose box, heavily littered with straw, and paddled for six feet up the walls.

Then the black stallion went forward readily enough, and as soon as he was in, the mare was called out. The negro removed the hobbles, shook off the noose of the lasso, and sent the door on the Black Mustang, unfettered, but a prisoner.

"And now to dinner, monsieur," said the courteous Frenchman. "If you will come to my room you shall have some of my clothes; the best I have, but such as you see."

Weston had almost ceased marveling. Every thing was so wonderful in this valley of enchantment. His host took him to a clean, cheerful room, the walls of which were plastered and painted pink. He assumed a hunting-shirt and cap of Saint Pierre's, but the leggings were far too large and loose for him.

The difficulty was settled by Mademoiselle Eulalie, who provided him with a set of her own, which fitted better, although pretty tight. Buck-skin stretches, however, and the young man soon presented a respectable backwoods appearance.

Then, with his hair combed, and his face and hands presentable, Frank Weston sat down to a plentiful dinner of game and trout, which was finished, to his farther surprise, with a cup of excellent French coffee and cognac!

Dinner over, his host produced a bundle of very neatly made cigars.

"Home manufacture, like all here, monsieur," he said. "You will find the tobacco good, and we will talk over affairs. You shall tell me how you came here, and I will tell you all my contrivances to obtain comfort in the wilderness."

He blew a cloud of smoke in the air. Beautiful Eulalie composedly lighted a cigarito of corn-husk which she rolled around the tobacco with the deft facility acquired by long practice. Weston gave a puff and told his story, when St. Pierre followed with his own in due course.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLDEN VALLEY.

"You must know, monsieur, that I am a red republican. I was the friend of Louis Blanc, Mazzini, and Kossuth, and I did my part in '48 toward lighting the flame of Revolution. During the republic I sat in parliament for my department. I unceasingly exposed the wiles of the conspirator Louis Bonaparte, and my party had their plans all arranged for impeaching him for violation of his oath, when he took us by surprise with his *coup d'état*. A price was set on my head, and I fled from France, taking with me my newly wedded wife, in December, 1852.

"Where could I flee to, but to the sheltering arms of the free, the glorious republic, the old-time ally of France. I took passage by way of Liverpool, England, and arrived in New York safely. Eulalie was born there, seventeen years ago now; and her mother, my poor Eulalie, whose image she is, died there too. I was left alone with a little infant, and inconsolable. I placed Eulalie in charge of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, near New York, and wandered all over the United States trying to find repose of mind. I crossed the Rocky Mountains in California, became enamored of prairie life, and for two more years I roamed abroad, depending on my rifle alone for subsistence, till I could conquer my grief for my lost wife.

"Alas! It only fed on solitude. One day, alone on the wild prairie, to the westward of here, a sudden and irresistible desire came over me to find and see my little daughter once more. I can not tell how the desire came, but it seized

me suddenly and capriciously, and became uncontrollable. It was at the foot of the Sierra Blanca, on the western borders of the Llano Estacado. I had camped out alone, according to my custom; and woke up in the morning, with this sudden longing in full possession of me. Before me lay a flat sandy desert, unexplored by white men, and reported to be an arid plain destitute of vegetation, and where no man could live to cross it.

"But something told me to push to the eastward, and I started. My horse was a noble creature and I carried a supply of water for both of us. And I tell you we needed it. We were three long days on the march over that sandy plain, without the first symptom of life, animal or vegetable, around us. The third day our scanty stock of water gave out completely. I pushed on till night, and just at sunset my eyes were greeted by the sight of a distant belt of timber, faintly visible on the horizon. I determined to ride all night if my horse dropped. The faithful creature carried me safely through, however, and before morning we trod on green grass once more.

"How I thanked the Giver of All Good, as the dark foliage stood out before me, obscuring the dim starlight! My horse scented water, too, and I rushed forward, coming at last to the stream you saw this morning above here.

"We were both of us glad to lie down and rest after that first delicious draught, and slept till morning, side by side.

"In the morning I explored the neighborhood and discovered the waterfall and chasm. When at last I saw this valley we inhabit I was charmed with its beauty.

"Here, I thought, 'I can rear me a hermitage, far from the dangers of the world, and bring up my little Eulalie, pure and innocent, till she is old enough to battle with the world.'

"I determined to do it. The idea pleased me mightily. I will not trouble you with my further adventures in the accomplishment of my purpose. Suffice it to say that I made my way to Austin City, thence to Houston and Galveston, and thence by way of New Orleans and the Mississippi to New York.

"I found my little Eulalie a prattling black-eyed child of three years old. She soon took to me, although she pined for

the good sisters for several days after we left. I engaged a nurse, and took passage for New Orleans. All the remains of my worldly wealth I turned into money, and purchased at New Orleans the necessary outfit for the little colony I contemplated founding. I bought also Jean Baptiste, my negro boy, at New Orleans, and his old mother Marie, who supplied the place of a mother to my Eulalie. Then, with a little train of pack-mules, for I knew parts of this route to be impracticable for wagons, I started from Austin in the month of August, 1855. We arrived here safely after a three weeks' journey. Baptiste and I at once set to work to make a practicable path through the glen, bridging the narrow gorges as you have seen. We have had but little trouble since to keep it in repair.

"Once comfortable, we began to turn our attention to luxury. I planted coffee and tobacco, and they thrived well, especially the latter. A few slips of grape-vine soon provided us with abundance of grapes, and we made wine in our third year. The art of distilling, as you are aware, is very simple; and, from wine, brandy followed very naturally. So that, before we had been five years here, we had our coffee and cognac without any difficulty.

"At last, in our twelfth year here, when Eulalie was fifteen, she came to me one day in great glee. A herd of mustangs was in our upper glen, and advancing into our valley. Of course our young Amazon was wild to catch them. I thought it impossible, but consented to try.

"We had less difficulty than I anticipated. The curious herd kept on down the path, timidly and hesitatingly; but finally emerged into the valley, and seemed delighted with the pasture. We kept ourselves concealed till they were too far in to escape, and then started for the entrance of the valley. We reached there without alarming them, and at once blocked up the entrance to the outer glen that communicates with this valley. It was very easily secured with a barricade of tree-trunks which were raised from the bridge. Then we returned to the valley and found the little herd, eighteen all told, feeding close to our house.

"As soon as we made our appearance from among the trees at the back of the house, the whole herd took fright and scampered away with amazing speed to the mouth of the valley.

"This was exactly what we wanted. In five minutes they had entered the first glen and were in the trap. We ran up as hard as we could go, and put up a barricade to keep them in, and they were safe.

"While traveling in Ohio once, I had made the acquaintance of a man of the name of Rarey, a natural genius in horse-taming. This man had given me instructions how to tame the most ferocious or most timid horse alike, by very simple methods.

"I am rather an enthusiast, monsieur, as you may notice, and I determined to try my friend Rarey's system fully and conscientiously.

"I can say that it proved a perfect success.

"Little bribes of corn and oats, constantly offered by my daughter and myself, have accustomed our horses to follow us like dogs. In the stable in the winter, in pasture in the summer, they are perfectly kind and gentle. And yet, three years ago they were all wild mustangs." * *

As day after day passed, the hermit forgot his resolution about turning out the stranger. He liked him too well as a member of his own class and a true hearted gentleman. He delighted in conversing with Frank, and hearing the history of the world since his seclusion. He took great interest in assisting him to tame the Black Mustang, after Rarey's system, and Estelle was allowed to try her hand on the animal.

With that marvelous mixture of feminine gentleness and masculine firmness that marked her character, she effected a complete conquest of the wild stallion in two days. The two men did nothing but look on, to see that no harm came to her. But she was too old a horse-tamer for that. The black had never had a chance, from the moment the first knee-strap was put upon him. When the contest was over, and he lay on his side conquered, Estelle turned round with smug triumph.

"*Alors, messieurs, je l'ai fait, tout seul.*" (Well, gentlemen, I have done it all alone.)

William was fain to admit that she had. Before the third day was over, any one could mount the Black Mustang, and ride him without saddle or bridle, with a little switch. His conquest was the more easily effected, he being so thoroughly tired and conquered with his long chase.

The three days of his taming were days of sweet influences to both Frank and Eulalie. They rode out of the glens and on the prairies, talked together about every thing, and of course fell in love—unconsciously, half-consciously, and at last consciously.

The hermit looked on complacently. He was an original and a reader of character. He saw this young man to be an honest gentleman, and he felt quite willing to take him for a guide and husband for Eulalie.

"I have money enough for us all, *mon ami*," he said, when Frank opened his heart to him and told him all his past history. "You are a gentleman, reduced to poverty. So was I fifteen years ago. If Eulalie loves you, you may marry, and we will all live in happiness together.

"Come with me now," he proceeded. "Eulalie has shown you her treasures. I will show you mine."

Frank had noticed the presence of gold in the quartz rocks, all round the valley, but he had not hunted for nuggets. He had been too much engaged with Eulalie's eyes to think of gold.

He followed his host to the stable, and thence to a large room in the rear, used as a harness room. Here the Frenchman pointed out to him a row of old pack-saddles, of the clumsy Mexican pattern, covered with dirty leather, and ornamented with brass nails, apparently.

On trying to lift one, he was surprised at its weight. His host put an end to his wonder, or rather re-excited it, by informing him that all in the row of saddles were *made of solid gold*, and the hollows necessary to make them light enough *filled with emeralds*, which abounded in the valley.

"I made them in this form to hide them," he said. "The old leather covers of my pack-saddles, with those dirty nails, will effectually ward off suspicion of their value. Each of these saddles weighs two hundred pounds, which will allow for a light load to complete the disguise. There are eighteen of them, which I shall load on my mustangs. Besides them I have twice as much more in the form of ingots, which I must return for some day. The silver I have not turned to any account, except to use for household purposes.

"I calculate to carry away, in gold and emeralds, about two

millions of dollars, and if I never come back to get the rest I shall not starve, eh?"

He would have uttered more, when the calm stillness of the landscape was suddenly broken by the sound of rifle-shots from the prairie outside of the rocks that protected the valley.

Saint Pierre started.

"Oh, mon Dieu!" he said, with an accent of indescribable bitterness; "I have kept you away, rule world, for fifteen years, and now you come, as you always do, in wounds and death."

The firing above the cliff grew quite rapid for a few moments, and Frank Weston recognized the peculiar tones of the repeating rifles of his late companions.

"It is my two friends," he cried; "and they have been attacked by Indians!"

All doubt was removed by a shrill chorus of yells, from a hundred throats, showing that the two friends must be over-matched by numbers. Then the shots of rifle and pistol came thick and fast, till finally a lull took place.

Frank Weston rushed for the stables, followed by Saint Pierre.

"We must help them somehow," panted Frank, as he ran on.

"We will," answered Saint Pierre. "In one hour I will show you these Indians a row of corpses. You shall see."

And Estelle came running to meet them as they entered the stable yard.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRAILERS TRAILED.

When Peter Wilkins and Gilmore resumed their journey, after changing horses, it was hot, dry noon on the plain. Not a sign was to be seen of Frank or his chase.

Little Gilmore noticed this with some apprehension.

"How shall we ever find that young fellow again, Pete?"

he asked. "I thought I had noted the exact spot where he had disappeared; but, what with changing the saddles, I'm quite turned round. There's not so much as a tree in sight to guide us."

Old Pete turned round, and scanned the horizon for some time. Then he shrugged his shoulders with a rueful face.

"Serves me right," he said, sulkily; "I ought to know that we couldn't ketch up with two sich flyers, without loads. We'll hev to feller thar trail, ef we kin find it."

"Surely that will be easy enough," replied Gilmore; "we have come in a direct line from the ravine, at least I should think so."

Pete Wilkins looked at the gambler with a curious expression.

"Yer may be a durned good shot, Gilmore," he finally observed; "but I'm durned ef yer arn't as innocent as a baby in arms about the plains. Look ahint yer."

Gilmore looked, wondering what the other meant. He could see nothing but the path, beaten down in the grass by the feet of their little string of horses.

"Well, what of it?" he inquired; "I see our trail, plain enough, and theirs can not be far off."

"Which way does yer shadder fall on the trail?" asked Pete.

"Why, away from it; to be sure," answered Gilmore.

"And whar was the sun when we started?" pursued the hunter.

"Behind us, I think."

"Wal, then; ain't yer got enough larnin' ter see that we've be'n a-goin' in a circumbendibus? We've both on us be'n a lookin' so hard, that we'd forgotten all about that. Whether the track be ter the right or ter the left, I dunno. Durn my karkidge ef I hain't clear furgotten all about it. We crosst it more nor wunst, and that's all I remembers."

"And for my part," said Gilmore frankly, "I don't so much as remember seeing it at all."

"Tain't wonderful," answered the hunter, rather bitterly, "couldn't expect a greenhorn to do any better."

"Well, Pete," said the gambler, with some impatience, "what's to be done?"

"We'll hev to divide, and hunt the trail," answered Pete, promptly. "Tain't no use a-cryin' over spilt milk. 'Thar trail erter be found easy enough, but, Lord alone knows how fur 'tis."

"Then let us set about it at once," cried Gilmore. "It can not but be fresh."

"Wait then, listen while I talk," said Pete. "You and I we'll hev ter go off from our own trail, right crostwise."

"At right angles, you mean," interrupted Gilmore.

"Don't know nauthen 'bout right angles, as you call 'em. I mean crostwise, criss-cross, that away," (pointing). "Take keer to keep a straight line, and ride straight ahead till one on us sees the trail. The man that eums on it fust is ter halt and fire a shot, and the other 'll come up."

"I understand," said Gilmore, promptly. "Which side shall I take?"

"The left," answered the hunter. "Keep them two swells in a line, and keep yer eyes skinned."

And the pair separated without more words, and rode off in opposite directions, to find the trail.

To a man of Gilmore's impatient spirit, the transition from a chase in full view, to the tedious process of tracking was very annoying. He rode on, with a string of awkward led horses to guard, looking right and left for the track, and in a tolerably bad temper.

It cost him a full hour's riding to get over this, and settle down to his work. When he did so, he looked back for Pete, and could only just catch sight of the hunter's figure, a speck in the distance.

There were no signs of the wished-for trail in his own vicinity, and Gilmore, unused to the patience and watchfulness of a prairie hunter, was beginning to be disgusted with his task, when his eyes were rejoiced with the sight of a puff of white smoke from old Pete's rifle, the signal of success.

The gambler turned his horse's head, and galloped back, followed by his string of pack-animals.

He found Pete Wilkins sitting on his horse, regarding a long line, broken down in the waving grass, which stretched away to the left, as far as they could see.

"Hev's the trail, Gil," observed the hunter;—"and now let's go along as quick as we kin."

Switing the action to the word, the two struck off on the trail at a canter, which they kept up for several miles. Not a word was spoken by either, till Gilmore suddenly pulled up.

"Hold hard, Pete," he said; "these horses can't go on like this, long. They weren't watered this morning."

Pete reduced his pace to a walk, and eyed the horses in silence. All of them, ridden and led, were covered with foam, and much exhausted. The hunter gave a resigned grunt.

"Sarves me right," he said. "Comin' out with a couple of boys—seems to me, I'm a gittin' a boy myself. Most haste was speed, as my granny used ter tell me. Wal, we've got ter foller the trail, and find water at night, I s'pose. Must be water in sum o' these hollers."

Gilmore looked up at the sky. The sun was within less than an hour of setting.

"Haden't we better look for water before dark?" he asked. "It'll be pretty hard finding it, if we follow this trail till sunset."

"And ef we leave the trail, it'll be pesky hard to find in the mornin', I tell yer," answered Pete.

"Better lose the trail than kill the horses," replied Gilmore, "for we couldn't follow it at all then."

"Thur's sense in what yer say, lad," observed the hunter. "Look around. Your eyes is sharp. See ef yer kin see any wood. Whar ther's wood, ther's water."

But although both strained their eyes, it was all to no purpose. The blank rolling grass prairie lay like a sea all around them, and not a tree disturbed the grand monotony.

"We mout as well go on," said Pete. "The trail's pretty sure to lead to water at last. That 'ere Black knowed what he wur about, when he headed this away."

Gilmore felt the force of the observation, and they rode along on the trail till sunset, at a slow pace. The horses suffered greatly from thirst, and the pace and weight combined. At last night put an end to their tracking, and old Pete halted just as the sun set.

"Thar," he said, dismounting from his little gray mare, the only one in the company that seemed to have any spirit left; "we mout as well camp here, far 'tain't no use—hello!" He broke off suddenly at this juncture.

The little mare whom he had left loose for a moment suddenly put down her head to the earth, snuffed for a moment, and then, bursting into a glad whinny, galloped off to the right of the path, over a little swell of ground, and disappeared.

Gilmore instinctively started to catch her.

"Never mind," cried Pete; "let her went, I tell yer. She's found water, you bet. See the rest."

It was true. The other horses strained at their halters to follow the mare. Pete mounted one of them, and they rode over the little swell of ground. The mare was just disappearing in the twilight, over a second swell, a quarter of a mile off.

They followed at their best pace, and, after a hard chase, at last arrived at a little pool of water, in a hollow of the prairie, about six feet across, and formed by an old buffalo wallow.

Here they were glad to go into camp for the night, and let their horses rest, after the fatigues of the day.

The next morning they started early on their own back trail, to find the place where they had left that of Weston and the Black Mustang.

But when they arrived there, it was a very hard matter to find it. The grass had risen again during the night, and it was no longer plain sailing. They were compelled to go slowly, and with extreme caution, Gilmore taking charge of all the horses, and old Pete going ahead on foot, tracking the steps of the "General." This was their only guide. Mustang and deer tracks, new and old, crossed them frequently, but Pete held on, spying from time to time the marks of the nails in the horse-shoes, and following them faithfully. It was very slow work, however. The confusion of tracks would have perplexed any but an old hunter. Pete advanced slow and sure, till night again overtook them.

There was no sign of timber or water near, and they were compelled to encamp, thirsty and fireless.

"That's no talkin' who may be around now, lad," said Pete. "That ar' devilish Black and the race-hoss, they must 'a' put on the pace to git over so much ground in one day. How-some-ever, to-morrer 'll tell, I guess. If we don't run into sumthin' by that time, I'll give up, and sw'ar they're both devils."

So the night wore away without adventure, and in the morning they resumed their task.

Old Pete followed the trail for about a mile, when it was suddenly crossed by a broad trail of horses' hoofs, all unshod. The hunter examined it sharply.

"Injuns," he said, simply.

"How do you know?" asked the gambler. "May it not be mustangs?"

"Mustangs never went as straight as that," said Pete. "Mustangs goes here, there, and everywhere, trots around and plays with each other. These 'ere goes straight along. Thur Injuns on the war path, and they was only hyar yesterday mornin'!"

"Well! What's to be done now?" asked Gilmore, looking to his rifle, as he spoke.

"Keep yer eyes skinned fur the varmints while I foller the trail," replied the hunter. "Thur's a hull grist on 'em, and thur goin' back ter the cliffs we left; but if they come acrost *our* trail, 'tar' my idee as they'll come fur us. So leave ahead."

The old hunter bent all his energies again to the trail he was pursuing, and followed it till noon; when they came in sight of the distant belt of timber, for which the Black Mustang had been making, when Weston finally came up with him.

Here old Pete mounted his little mare once more.

"'Fain't no ~~too~~ de in' any more trackin' now," he observed. "They must 'a' gone for that timber in a bee-line. Let's git."

Just as he spoke, Gilmore uttered a sharp cry of recognition.

"I thought so, Pete," he cried. "Look back. There come the Indians."

Pete's glance followed his own. There they could see, at a distance of not more than a couple of miles, a large war-party of Indians, their lance-heads glittering in the sun, coming at full speed for their little convoy.

Pete Wilkins seized the end of the halter, thrown him by Gilmore; and without another word, the two started for the timber at full speed, the pack-horses galloping alongside.

Their animals were all jaded and weary, from want of water, but the sight of timber ahead seemed to inspire them with strength, for they went at a lively pace, without much urging.

The distance to cover could not be more than five miles, and both the companions felt in good hopes of getting there before the Indians.

They pressed on at a fair speed, now and then looking back at their pursuers. The latter were gaining rapidly.

By the time three miles were passed, the Indians had reduced their distance to one-half; and it became evident, that before the cover could be reached, the enemy would be within gun-shot.

"Git yer shootin' irons ready, Gil," said the old hunter, handling his own, as he swept along. "We'll hev to stop the varmints afore we git ther, I'm afeard."

Gilmore drew his pistols from his belt, one after the other, and quietly revolved them, to see if they were in order. His demeanor was as calm, as if out on a pleasure ride.

Both rode steadily on, the Indians drawing closer and closer, till they had arrived within a hundred yards of the trees, when the pursuers, for the first time, uttered a loud yell.

"Halt!" shouted the old hunter. "We've run fur enough. Let's stop and give it to the cusses."

As he spoke, he pulled up the little mare, and turned to face the enemy. Gilmore followed his example, and the two stood at bay.

The savages were not two hundred yards from them, and charged into a dense mass, coming on at full speed.

Both the white men raised their rifles at the same instant, and opened fire on the crowd at short range. Then it was that the powers of the terrible repeating rifles proved equal to the occasion.

The Indians presented a perfect mark, all huddled together as they were. The first two shots dropped two of their number, and the rest only yelled the louder, and came on faster. But when shot after shot, in almost as many seconds, followed, they wavered in doubt. That hesitation gave opportunity for the cool, desperate white men to fire two more shots apiece.

It settled the question. The whole mass broke and fled, throwing themselves over the sides of their horses to shield their persons, and followed by the spiteful bullets, till they were out of range.

There they clustered in groups, riding to and fro, and not daring to come within gun-shot again.

But the position of the two was sufficiently embarrassing. It was evident that the Indians had no firearms, or they would have used them; but it was equally plain that they were in numbers sufficient to annihilate the whites, if they got near enough.

Old Pete looked worried, as he sat on his horse. Every now and then he would try a long shot at some savage, bolder than the rest, who would ride out alone. But the distance was too great for accuracy. Every unsuccessful shot was a loss, in their position, and caused the Indians to become bolder.

Pete noticed with anxiety that they were trying to get to his rear, and already he had commenced a speech of warning to Gilmore, when both men were electrified by the sound of a bugle, directly in their rear, ~~sounding~~ the "*Forward*" of the *U. S. Cavalry*.

The next moment out burst three horsemen from the wood, glittering from head to foot in armor.

CHAPTER X.

THE HUMAN CORRAL.

THE General, the Black Mustang, and Jaguar, as Eulalie named her spotted stallion, were all standing in the stable. Corn and oats were plentiful in the valley, and the three horses had been fed up well.

The General and the black had recovered from their fatigue, and neighed out a welcome to their masters as they came rushing in.

"Come to the larnes-room!" cried the Frenchman; "we have weapons there, but no firearms. Still we can do something, and get those savages into the glen. I have a trap for them there. Come along."

They rushed into the larnes-room, Eulalie foremost. She ran to the side of the room and threw open a case.

"Here, quick!" she cried, and threw to Frank Weston, to his utter astonishment, a hauberk, or shirt of mail, *made of chainwork of solid silver*.

"It is arrow proof," she said, hastily, and in a few moments more had donned a similar one herself.

The cave contained several suits of armor in silver, made by the ingenious Saint Pierre, during his sojourn in the valley, as a substitute, defensively, for his loss in *offensive* power by the failure of his gunpowder.

In ten minutes from that time, three mailed figures, splendid and glittering, and resembling medieval knights, rode out from the cave-yard, and dashed at full speed up the valley. Eulalie Saint Pierre seemed to take her place as naturally as a man, and rode foremost on the far-famed Black Mustang.

All three carried swords, made of steel by the hermit, but their lance-heads and arrows were of silver, like their armor.

Saint Pierre rode Jaguar, who proved to be almost as fast as the General himself.

As they galloped up the valley, Baptiste made his appearance, and his master showed some directions to him, which Frank lost, in the hurry of the moment. The negro nodded, and ran after them with an ax on his shoulder.

It required but a few moments for the cavaliers, so magnificently mounted and armed, to reach the glen, and gallop at full speed up the narrow pass.

The hermit led the way, on Jaguar, and was soon at the top, on level ground. They could see nothing of the combat, as yet. The belt of timber that hid the stream, also hid the Indians and their antagonists.

They had heard two or three shots only, since the first rapid burst, and Weston concluded that his friends had repulsed the savages, who were at bay.

Saint Pierre turned his horse to the right, and dashed through the timber that completely masked the opening into the glen. They followed along the gloomy path, overlaid and with thick moss, for about a hundred yards, when they emerged suddenly on the open prairie.

There they came in full view of the fight.

As Weston had anticipated, it was his two friends, Pete Wilkins and Little Glimore, with a string of led horses be-

hind them. They sat still on their own animals, outside of their little train, rifle in hand. Beyond, out on the level plain, and just out of gun-shot, was a line of Indians, seventy or eighty at least, riding confusedly to and fro, and hesitating to attack the two men.

"Eh, parbleu!" growled Saint Pierre, under his grizzled beard, "but they are cowards, those Indians. They must be Comanches. Come along, then! Let us charge them."

But before he started he raised his bugle to his lips and blew a loud call.

It was the "Forward" of the U. S. cavalry.

"They will think there are troops here," he said, laughing.

The next moment the three dashed out, at the full speed of their fresh and vigorous horses, and tore down on the Indians.

The latter broke instantly, and fell back several hundred yards, dismayed at the apparition of three shining figures, such as they had never seen before.

"Tell your friends to get into the glen, quick, or they are lost," said the Hermit, hastily, as he pulled up his horse. "The Indians will be back again in two minutes, when they are over their surprise."

Frank galloped up to Pete Wilkins, who sat on his horse, transfixed with wonder at the three white horsemen.

"Fall back to the timber, Pete," he shouted. "We must take to the glen to defend ourselves. Drive in the red horses."

Old Pete uttered a cry of awe-stricken surprise.

"Gee-hoshaphat! gee rewsalem! gee jiminy crikey! Waaah, *waah*, what in all creation *lee* ye be'n doin', and who are yie now?"

"I'll tell you when we're safe," answered Frank, hastily. "I've caught the mustang and found friends. Come back, I tell you. Don't you see the Indians are rallying?"

And indeed the savages, seeing the white men left, had begun to cluster together, as if for a fresh advance.

"Good advice, Peter," observed Little Gilmore, quietly. "We'd better take it if we want to keep our scalps."

And he turned his horses and started for the timber. The Frenchman and Kulalie, in the mean time, rode about outside

surveying the astonished Indians, and overawing them for the present.

But when the Comanches saw the three white men retreating to the timber, they realized that they had been duped, and a few of the boldest dashed out. By the time, however, the whole body had gathered courage enough to advance, the little train of led horses was in the timber.

Then the hermit and his daughter galloped back, and, the instant they turned, the Indians opened cry like a pack of hounds, and followed at full speed.

But the start of the fugitives was too great to be overcome before they could get to the mouth of the glen. Here they found Frank and his companions, undecided what to do. They had heard the yells of the Indians, and halted to defend the other two. Weston had already seized his rifle and pistols, which hung on his old saddle, and was ready to do his duty without any more nervousness.

St. Pierre leaped from his horse.

"*Escoutez, gentlemen,*" he cried, in French.

The old hunter understood the gesture better than the words, and obeyed.

St. Pierre gave his horse a blow with his long lance, and the steed galloped off down the path to the valley.

"The others! the others! Make them follow!" he shouted to Weston, as the yells of the approaching Indians warned them to hurry.

One after another the horses were driven down, in single file, and followed their leader at a hard gallop. As the last disappeared, the crackling of dry sticks, and the rapid gallop of horses announced that their pursuers were after them into the timber, and would soon be up.

"*Adieu mes amis!*" cried St. Pierre, dropping his lance and drawing his sword.

He ran down the path at full speed, followed by the rest, till the narrow way turned an angle in the rock, and the first of the pursuing Indians were or glances opened before them.

The solitary passed at a corner of the path. The gorge in this place was not over ten feet wide, and very dark. The hermit put his hand to the rock at the side of the path. A tall slab of quartz revolved on a pivot, and displayed to their

view a narrow passage and a winding staircase cut in the solid rock.

"Eulalie first," said the Frenchman.

The girl sprung into the passage way, like one well used to it, and the rest followed. Saint Pierre remained last, to close the door, which he did, just as the clatter of hoofs on the rocks above announced a close pursuit. St. Pierre laughed, as he pulled to the ponderous slab, and ascended the staircase. It was faintly lighted by several loop-holes, that from without seemed nothing but natural chinks in the rocks. He went up about fifty feet, and found himself in a long gallery, a natural ledge in the rock originally, but hollowed out with much patient labor by the hermit and Baptiste, in past times.

Thousands of years ago the stream had rested at that level, and this upper path ran parallel with the lower one. The four companions were already there, peeping over a parapet of rocks into the valley below. They commanded a full view of the whole of the glen, down to the next gorge.

The Indians were already galloping down the path like madmen, yelling after their anticipated prey. The Frenchman smiled grimly, as he noticed that most of the party was already beyond the *second gorge*. He could hear them yelling there. They had caught sight of the fleeing horses in the *last glen*.

"Now, messieurs," he said, "if Baptiste only does his duty, we have them in a trap."

He looked over as he spoke, and started back with a savage oath.

"*Ah! morbleu!*" he said; "the *peñon* has seen me, and is off."

The rest looked over, and could just discern the figure of an Indian, as he disappeared round the corner of the first gorge, *up the pass*. Gilmore struck his knee with his fist in passion.

"It was Tom Austin," he ejaculated. "He has caught me a second time. Oh, if I had but a horse here."

But the escape of the false Indian could not be helped. The horses were all far away by this time.

"Now, messieurs," cried the Frenchman, "help me to push this rock down, and we have them all."

He pointed to a large boulder, as he spoke. It stood at the beginning of the gallery just at the mouth of the first gorge. Five or six large wooden levers lay behind it, apparently on purpose to upset it at some time.

The five companions united their strength, and toppled the large mass over into the gorge beneath. The sound of crashing timbers announced that the narrow bridge was destroyed. They looked over. Where before a safe sloping platform had occupied the face of the little gorge, a black chasm appeared, into which fell a seething waterfall. No human being could pass it till a fresh bridge was built.

"Now follow, messieurs," said Saint Pierre, when the feat was accomplished. "Let us see what Baptiste has been doing."

They hurried along the gallery, which took them into the second glen, where the upper path still continued. They ran on, the Indian yells becoming plainer every moment, and soon found themselves in the third or last glen, the exit from which was into the Golden Valley.

The portal into the valley was between two tall walls of rock, not six feet apart, and running up for fifty feet perpendicularly. Then came the ledge on which their upper gallery was made, marking a stratum of softer rocks.

But this tall narrow gorge now presented the appearance of an immense case door, the place of the bars being taken by thick logs of green wood, which were arranged to fit across the opening.

Wentworth remembered noticing two deep grooves, cut into the rock on each side, and had never guessed their use till now. Thick, solid beams, a foot in diameter, and carefully cut to the requisite length, had been accumulated above, during a period of years. The channel had been made with infinite labor by the Hermit and Baptiste, assisted by natural fissures in the rock.

A sort of open-work dam, twenty-five feet in height, was, by simply throwing these logs one after another down the channel, formed across the stream, behind which the water was rapidly rising in the lower and narrower part of the glen. Above it, the valley swelled out to three or four times the same breadth.

The whole mob of Indians was collected before the barrier, trying to climb it. Weston looked, expecting to see the horses of his party captured by the Comanches, and sure enough, there they were, along with the Indians!

"And now, monsieur," said Saint Pierre to Frank, "you and your friends can shoot down the Indians at your leisure. I have done what I can. They are in the trap."

Old Pete Wilkins understood the gesture of the Frenchman, if not the words. He coolly raised his rifle.

"I'll teach yer to come arter *my* scalp, ye painted varmints," he said, vindictively. "Ef it hadn't 'a' ben for this 'ere feller in silver—and who the Old Scratch he is, I dunno—guess ye'd 'a' had us an' our hosses too."

Grumbling away to himself in this fashion, he took a long and careful aim at an Indian, who had but just clambered almost to the top of the barricade. There was a flash and a crack, and the Comanche fell back into the stream, dead.

The scene that followed was one of the direst confusion. The Indians, for the first time aware that their enemies were *above* them, uttered shrill yells, and turned about to fight.

But they were in a worse trap than had ever caught them before. Three good shots were above them, at about two hundred feet distance. Each man of them had a repeating rifle, and was in a position perfectly inaccessible to the savages. The latter were armed only with bows and arrows and spears. What could they do? Before they had concluded to do *any thing*, five or six had fallen under the deliberate, rapid fire from above. Then they turned and fled up the pass in dismay, only to find themselves hemmed in there by another impassable obstacle. Mad with terror, they climbed on each other's shoulders to scale the waterfall. The pitiless bullets of Little Gilmore picked them off from their work, with merciless accuracy.

The spirit of a fiend seemed to be aroused in the breast of the little desperado. When stout old Pete Wilkins groveled his rifle with a shudder, swearing that he "couldn't kill the poor critters any more," Gilmore it was who continued his deadly shots, without pause or intermission. He seemed to have some fell purpose in his murders, for when Weston begged him to desist, he turned on him with:

"Sir, I must kill these men, or *how shall I ever get out of this place after Tom Austin?* Leave me alone."

Every one gazed with astonishment upon this singular being, so slender and fragile in appearance, so effeminate in manner, who now displayed such hideous accuracy in the work of death, such entire remorselessness.

At last the dreadful work was done. The helpless savages, running here and there in vain terror, making frantic efforts to escape the rocks, like rats in a cage, without so much as a place to hide their heads in, were all dead or dying.

Then Saint Pierre, pale as death after the slaughter which fell necessarily had ordered, descended the stairs that led to the lower path, followed by the others, Little Gilmore first.

The sight was horrible, as dead and wounded men lay all around, choking up the usually clear stream into a foul, polluted flood. The hermit shuddered, but Little Gilmore addressed him in fair French.

"Monsieur," he said, "I have a favor to ask. Lend me a fresh horse, and help me to get out of here. My own horse is tired out. A deadly enemy of mine has escaped, and I must follow him."

The Frenchmen bowed coldly. He could not help a shudder before this merciless man.

"Take any of my horses, monsieur," he said. "I will show you a way to leave the valley."

From its hiding place on the ledge above, a temporary bridge was extended, and lowered across the chasm at the top of the gorge. Gilmore was so savagely eager to be away on the trail after Tom Austin, whose horse he knew must be tired, that he did not even stop to say a word.

He transferred his saddle and equipments to Jaguar, and followed him by Saint Pierre. The horse stood trembling in the midst of nearly a hundred others, huddled together in the lower gorge, driven higher and higher by the rising water, which already had reached the top of the dam, and was flowing over it. The back-water half filled the lower gorge and glen.

But Gilmore never stopped to notice any thing. He looked to his rifle, loaded all his pistols afresh, and rode off up the narrow ledge till he found himself on the path leading into the woods. He gave the spurs to Jaguar. The noble beast

bounced forward at the top of his speed, and soon carried the desperado out on the broad prairie.

Gilmore's eager glance scanned the plain in vain. No one was to be seen to the east. He dashed across the belt of timber to the west, and his hopes were verified. Away in the advance, and about three miles off, now, was a single horse-man, heading west.

Gilmore gave a savage oath, and galloped after the distant stranger at full speed.

He *felt* who it was.

CHAPTER XI.

HUNTED DOWN.

WHEN Gilmore left the belt of timber that encircled the Golden Valley, he saw before him a flat prairie, only covered with short grass, and without any of the swells that mark the plains in general.

The fugitive had gained time during the fight in the valley to escape, and was now riding away at an easy pace.

But Gilmore felt that he was mounted on a horse able to outrun any thing the other rode. Jaguar, fresh from the stable, full of corn and oats, sped on with elastic bounds, his head tossing from side to side, as if at play, champing the bit as he went.

The gambler's heart beat more forcibly than its wont. The man whom he had chased all over Texas was at last before him, and could not escape. At every bound of Jaguar, Little Gilmore's pulse seemed to throb with madder joy, as he saw himself drawing nearer.

He had caught a glimpse of the fugitive's face in the path in the plain. He could not be mistaken in the man. He knew well the bony form, the fierce, bold face, with its heavy black beard, bristling and stiff.

Oh! how he shuddered with hate and rage, as he recalled the day that changed the whole tenor of his life when that huge desperado had seized him, a small, weak and inoffensive man.

teacher, and publicly beaten and degraded him, in the open street, before a crowd of grinning brutes, who stood in awe of the ruffian's strength and weapons.

"Ah! Tom Austin," he muttered, as he flew along on the 'rack of the other, "we've changed all that now. Who's the coward now?"

On they went, pursuer and pursued. At first, Gilmore gained very rapidly, the other not having seen him, but now he turned his head to look back, and as soon as he saw his enemy, Tom Austin turned his spurs in his horse's flanks, and excited him to his utmost speed.

It was indeed Tom. The nearer Gilmore drew the clearer was his recognition. There was no mistaking that form.

"Weight will tell," muttered the gambler to himself.

He shook his bridle, and Jaguar increased his speed. Already he had lessened his distance to a mile and a half, and his horse was still fresh.

The grass grew thinner and thinner as they went. Little patches of dry sand began to appear here and there. Gilmore could see that they were running into the margin of the arid Llano Estacado.

The horse of the renegade was laboring. Even at the distance he was, Gilmore could see that. He seemed to be in heavy ground, and his rider was whipping and spurring him frantically.

Gilmore shook his rein once more, and Jaguar again increased his speed, tearing along over grass and sand, till he, too, had passed the last remains of the prairie and entered on the region of deep sand.

The hot sun blazed into Gilmore's eyes, and a blinding glare shot up from the hot sand.

He had gained considerably in distance, his own firm ground to go upon, while his adversary was laboring in the soft sand. He was now over half a mile off.

As far as he could see ahead, and to the right and left, a flat, sandy plain, strewn with rocks, extended. Jaguar began to labor himself, as he felt the deep, soft sand under his feet, and the little gambler allowed him to take his own pace. He saw that his enemy's horse could not last much longer, and he resolved to save his own.

While he was doing so, he observed the other suddenly increase his pace, and perceived that he had got on to a stratum of harder ground at last.

Gilmore gave a muttered curse as he saw the other very slowly gaining on him, and realized that Jaguar was bathed in sweat. But, he refrained from punishing the horse with the spur, knowing that it was useless till they reached firm ground. At last they did so, and after a few bounds, Gilmore for the first time touched Jaguar with the spurs, and gave a cry of encouragement. The noble horse bounded forward at a pace that promised to bring him up with the other in a very short time. The ground turned out to be a platform of rock, that stretched for several miles ahead, and the gambler found that he was gaining so rapidly as to be within long gun-shot.

He could see his enemy clearly now, as he looked over his shoulder every now and then. He was accoutered as an Indian chief, and armed with bow and arrows and a lance.

Every time he turned his head, Gilmore gave a shout and spurred Jaguar, and every time he gained a rod. At last he was close enough to see that his enemy's horse was completely blown. Jaguar was not much better, thanks to the immense start the renegade had.

But the chase ended, with the rocky platform. On the other side came a second deep bed of sand, and here at last Austin's horse fell down, half stumbling, quite exhausted, throwing his master several feet forward, and lying there, unable to rise.

When the renegade scrambled to his feet, half stunned, there was Little Gilmore, pulling up Jaguar, within twenty feet of him, and covering him with a revolver. But Tom Austin had run far enough.

He was by no means deficient in courage, although his flight before Gilmore would seem to imply it. Once, he had been the bully of the frontier, always ready for a fight, and dreaded far and wide for his strength and daring. He was a good pistol shot, and had been the hero of a hundred knife and bowie knife duels. Some undefined dread of Gilmore, ever since he had heard the stories of the other's marvelous skill with the pistol, so far excelling his own, had caused him to shun a meeting with a kind of superstition.

But now that he was driven to bay, although quite unprovided with firearms, the ruffian showed the one virtue of his nature, physical courage, born of brute strength. He snatched at his quiver to draw an arrow. The next instant a pistol bullet smashed into the quiver itself, breaking up and rendering useless most of the arrows, and sending the splinters flying.

With a curse of rage and pain, Austin drew away his hand from among the splintered arrows, and whipped out his long knife.

"Ah! curse ye, ye little whelp," he howled, "if I had ye on the ground, I'd cut yer little heart out."

He looked up in Gilmore's face, and, ruffian as he was, he trembled before its concentrated ferocity.

The countenance of the lesser man, usually so mild, gentle, and lamb-like, was transformed into that of a fiend. Satan might have looked so, glaring in hatred at man, who had usurped his place among the angels, delivered to his power in flames eternal.

The broad, shadowy hat was pushed from his brow, his bright hair hung in disheveled curls about his neck, his face, white as ashes, was lighted up by the demoniac glare of his fierce blue eyes, that looked down the black orbs of the other with a fury so fearful in its intensity that the bully cowered before it.

He spoke not a word for some minutes, during which he sat on his pining horse like a statue, not a muscle moving, as he held his revolver pointed at Austin's heart.

At last he opened his white lips and spoke. The stillness of the desert around was intense. He hardly spoke above a whisper, and yet every word was distinctly audible.

"Austin," he began, "five years ago you met me, a poor, insignificant music teacher, who loved a beautiful woman, and thought her my soul. You took advantage of the strength God gave you to insult and beat me. You knew I was weak, and yet, when you struck me, I did my best to fight you. You, a coward that you were, ran no danger in attacking an unarmed man whom you could strangle with one hand. You held me down, beat and kicked me, and degraded me in the eyes of the woman I loved, and took her from me. You

called me a 'little whelp,' then. You dared to repeat it now. *Look at your horse !*"

He spoke the last words so quick and sharp, that Austin involuntarily turned his head to see. In the instant that his *profile* was presented to view, Little Gilmore, with his peculiarly rapid aim, sent a second bullet crashing through his jaw, cutting his tongue to pieces.

A howl of agony, inarticulate and dreadful, burst from the huge ruffian. He turned to rush at Little Gilmore. Quick as thought the latter pointed his pistol, and brought Austin to the ground with a shattered knee-pan. There he lay, writhing in impotent rage, terror and pain.

The clear, pitiless voice of Little Gilmore, relentless as fate, fell on the poor wretch's ear.

" You'll never call another man a little whelp, Tom Austin. The little whelp has grown a dog who can bite, and the big bully is nothing but a big coward, after all his brags. Did I howl when you had me down, coward and ruffian? Did I quail when the horsewhip was cutting me to pieces? You know how I fought till I was senseless, coward, lully, great wretch that you are. You great fellows are all cowards, Tom. You're brave enough where your strength helps you; but here's equality, Tom Austin, *here's equality*, curse your cowardly heart."

And he shook his pistol vindictively at the fallen man.

Tom Austin slowly rose to his feet, leaning on his lance, and standing on one leg. His looks were ghastly and horrible. The blood streamed over the strong waves of his black beard, and his face was contorted with pain. His eyes glared with rage, and yet, withal, there was a certain dignity in his look, as he faced the man who held him in his power.

He tried to speak. An inarticulate babble was all he could utter. The relentless Gilmore laughed savagely.

" Ha ! Tom Austin. Foul-mouthed lully ! you'll never call another man a whelp. I've spoilt your tongue forever, scoundrel. And I've brought down your pride, too, coward, coward, coward."

He seemed to take peculiar pleasure in taunting the other with cowardice. The next moment Austin drew himself up proudly enough, now that his fate was inevitable. He signed

to Gilmore that he should shoot quick, and kill him. But the implacable gambler was determined to torture him with a English ingenuity an Indian might have admired.

"No, no, Tom Austin," he said, with a cold, pitiless laugh of malignity, "you made me suffer once; you must suffer now. You struck me with your fist once. Take that for it."

And as he spoke, he shot the other through the right hand, shattering the fingers.

"You kicked me," he went on; and another bullet struck the poor wretch in the foot.

Tom Austin never stirred. He stood like a statue.

Gilmore stopped. He had fired five shots at the other, who had not flinched from the last.

"Beh! Tom Austin!" he cried, suddenly, "you're not quite a coward after all. Here, take a chance."

And as he spoke, he deliberately threw his revolver, with one charge left in it, to the feet of the other.

"Blaze away, Tom, and fight for your life," he said, with a sarcastic laugh, drawing a second pistol, as the other stooped to pick up the weapon.

Poor Austin rose with difficulty, pistol in hand, as Gilmore leaped from his horse and stepped up to him. The large man let the pistol hang from his left hand, the uninjured one, while he tried to steady himself on one foot. It was useless, and he sank to the ground on one knee.

Gilmore stood before him, calm, terrible, remorseless, a human tiger.

"Why don't you fire, Tom?" he asked, coldly; "I'm waiting for you."

For all answer, the other raised his bloody hand, and pointed to his mouth and knee. Even Gilmore, worked up as he was to a frenzy of cruelty, felt the force of the mute appeal. For the first time he began to feel ashamed of his cruelty.

Tom Austin suddenly raised the pistol in his left hand, gave a horrible smile of triumph at his thought, and blew his own brains out before the feet of the man he had wronged, and who now had his revenge. Gilmore could torture him no more.

The gambler stood still, gazing at the fallen body, in marble stillness.

"Gone at last," he muttered to himself, after a while. "Gone beyond me at last. And not quite a coward, after all."

He stood looking at the body in silence for some time. It was a horrible sight, and yet he did not shudder. He gazed quietly on the oozing blood, the disfigured face, and not a muscle stirred. At last he was roused by a tug at his arm, and the horse Jaguar, pulling at his bridle, recalled him to himself. He turned round, and patted the beautiful creature's neck, as gently as a woman might.

"Poor fellow!" he said, softly, and then resumed his ordinary demeanor.

He advanced to the body, and searched among the clothes. Apparently he was looking for something. If so, he found it, for he presently drew out a small portrait, which he opened.

He looked on the face of a dark, Spanish-looking woman, of singular beauty. Gilmore looked at it, long and steadily. At last his lip curled in a strange, writhing smile of intense pain and self-contempt. He looked down at the corpse, brutal and repulsive, even in death, and broke out:

"Aha! Dolores, *mi querida*. So you wanted the thews and sinews of a man, did you?—and took *him*—"

And as he spoke, he dashed down the picture; stamped on it violently; clutched the pistol from the dead man's hand; and turned away, leaving the ghastly corpse alone in the desert.

He threw himself on Jaguar, and allowed the horse to take his own path. The animal went straight for home, at a steady walk, Gilmore sitting, listless and thoughtful, in his saddle, dead to all surrounding objects, and harried in a maze of conflicting reveries.

About midnight he halted, in sight of the trees that encircled the valley. He lifted his head suddenly. Then he turned his horse, and rode back at a brisk pace into the desert.

He arrived at the scene of the murder, dead, scolded, or whatever else it may be called, in about an hour. He found the poor horse of the dead man risen up, and staring toward the trees. The poor creature neighed with joy at seeing Jaguar.

Gilmore dismounted and picketed the latter. Then advancing to the body, he took the dead man's knife, and scooped a hasty grave by its side. He arranged poor Austin's limbs decently, and covered him with earth. Then, mounting Jaguar once more, he rode off on the back track, followed by the Indian horse.

Arrived at the belt of trees, he tethered both of them a good mile from the entrance of the valley, where grass and water were fresh, and passed the night in perfect solitude.

CHAPTER XII.

THE END.

As soon as Gilmore had departed, St. Pierre blew his bugle. It was answered by the appearance of Jean Baptiste, on the little ledge that appeared to be cut in the face of the rocks, high up the side of the narrow gateway that opened into the valley.

The negro seemed to be perfectly at home in his airy position. He speedily produced a long beam, which he ran out across the top of the gateway, till it rested on the ledge opposite to him. A tackle and blocks were next brought from some place of concealment, round the corner of the rock, and fastened to the beam.

Then Baptiste boldly lowered himself, by means of the tackle, down to the dam. The water was running off it, and splashing from all the interstices in streams. The negro rapidly and securely affixed a pair of grappling-irons to one end of the top log. He swung himself to the cliff on one side, where a series of steps had been cut for his reception. Standing on the rock, one end of the upper log rose in the air till it was nearly perpendicular. Then the grappling-irons slipped, and the log fell over the dam, into the valley below, arrested by the opposing block.

The tackle was again lowered, and the after-log lifted up, and carried over the first in the same way. In less of half an

hour the dam was gone, and the drawbridge lowered above the little stream that fell into the valley. Then the party descended the path, crossed the drawbridge, and found that the sloping platform which led into the valley across the face of the little waterfall, was still standing. As each log was removed, the stream had descended so gradually that no damage had been done. The wrecks of the dam were floating about in the little pond, but otherwise no sign existed of the recent disturbance.

It was an easy matter to secure the horses of the slain Indians. Huddled up on the narrow path, they were one after the other taken into the valley, and hobbled to prevent their escape.

Pete Wilkins was wonder-struck at every thing; the beauty of the scenery, the commodious house, the elegant stables, every thing astonished him; but above all, the wonderful riches of the bed of the stream.

Saint Pierre perceived that it would be impossible to conceal these riches from him long; and since Frank could vouch for the honesty of the old hunter, he was told every thing. He readily promised secrecy when required.

"I'd be a darned fool if I wur to tell any one," he remarked. "Ef what you say's true, there are enough gold to keep me in all I want for the rest of my days. Bat, what's plenty for one ain't enough for ten thousand; and ef the fellers in Houston was to ketch wind o' this here place, that wouldn't be a nigger left in a year from now. No, no, Frank, I'll whack up with yer, but I'll keep mum."

So the matter was settled. It was determined, however, to leave the valley as soon as possible, for fear of the escaped Indian or Tom Austin—whichever it was—bringing back a heavier force on them than they could manage.

The ammunition of the party was reduced to about fifty rounds, all told, and they could not have sustained a serious attack. So they set about their preparations at once.

The eighteen park saddles, so rough in cover, so precious in frame, were ready for use. Loads of wool and dried beef, light in reality, but huge in outside show, were made up for them. The horses of the Indian warriors were found to be already saddled, with bear and buffalo hides. In these hides

ingots of gold were concealed, till each bear bore a load of about a hundred pounds.

Provisions and grain sufficient to enable them to reach the settlements were made ready, and by nightfall the stables were full of horses, and every thing was prepared.

And then at last, when every one was hungry and tired, they sat down to supper: and old Pete related his adventures since he parted from Frank; or rather, since the latter left him, so suddenly, in pursuit of the Black Mustang.

Our little party passed their last night in the valley in peace and quietness.

At an early hour next day, every one was astir. The horses were loaded with their precious freight, and fastened to each other in a long string.

The beautiful mustangs of the valley were left unloaded, to serve as riding horses. The captured ponies of the Indians bore the packs.

It was not her appearance, attired as an ordinary hunter, and the fun of the thing was that old Pete never suspected her sex. He took her for a handsome boy only. She was dressed as a man, and rode like one, managing the Black Mustang himself with all the fearlessness and grace of a perfect horseman.

Old Marie was apparently the only female of the party; and she displayed great trepidation, when put on a horse, for the first time in fifteen years. But Jean Baptiste rode like a veteran, and took good care of his mother.

Old Pete stuck to his little gray mare, although offered the pick of St. Pierre's stud.

"They're better horses," he said; "and I don't deny it. But this here little mare I know like a book, and I want no better."

So he contented himself with lightening her as much as possible, and came on ahead of the party, as scout and protector.

The Frenchman brought out his old rifle and revolver, which he had used for so long. They were in excellent preservation, and of good old serviceable patterns.

He declined to take for his revolver, but there was no ammunition for the rifle, till Frank Weston broke up some car-

tridges to furnish powder, while St. Pierre himself cast a dozen bullets of pure gold before leaving.

If they had had occasion to fire, they would have astonished some one.

But, luckily, there was no occasion. They passed rapidly across the high table-land to the east, marching all day long. At evening they had arrived at the cliffs from whence Frank had chased the Black Mustang, and went into camp at the very same motte.

They found traces of the camp of the Indians,—who had evidently turned back there, to the pursuit that had cost them so dear, for their trail ceased to be visible any further.

Old Pete went out on an exploring expedition, and came in, quite satisfied as to the way in which the Indians had obtained their information.

"I found that 'ere varmint's track, boots and all," he told them. "He must hev followed us afoot. I s'pose he war afeerd ter go ter the settlements, fur fear o' bein' hung fur steadin' Uncle Louis' property, so he must 'a' turned round ter go back ter his friends, the Comanches. Anyway he's clawed up afore now, or I'm a durned fool, and I don't think I ar'. Ef Little Gilmore gits hold on him, he'll make him squirm, *I tell yer.*"

But nothing was heard of Little Gilmore for that night. What had become of him, was a mystery.

The next morning, the horses were watered, and fed with grain, of which they carried about five days' allowance. Then the loads were adjusted, and the long string of horses started. There were nearly a hundred animals, all told, some loaded with grain, others with wool; but all having more or less gold, concealed in their loads.

The horses ridden were only the very finest, and each person had two spare animals, unloaded, to "change off" on.

It was an anxious business at night to guard this herd, but by means of hobbles it was effected, and they suffered no losses.

On the evening of the third day they had passed the last great cliff-step, that divided them from the lowlands. They had lost no animals on the road, although they had many very narrow escapes, and they went into camp on a little tributary of the Colorado, with thankful hearts.

While they were all sitting round the fire, talking over the adventures of the day, a horseman rode up to the camp, on a horse spotted over like a leopard. The animal neighed loudly as he approached, and the Frenchman recognized Jaggar.

It was Little Gilmore, quiet and cool, as usual. His horse was jaded, as from hard riding and short feed, which was exactly what ailed him.

Gilmore dismounted and advanced to Saint Pierre.

"Monsieur," he said, courteously, "I return you many thanks for the use of your horse. I regret that he is tired, as you see, but you had a day's start of me, and I had to ride fast on your trail."

The old man bowed. He did not conceal his coldness. Little Gilmore looked at him a moment, as if about to speak, but he altered his mind and turned away.

The Frenchman was one of those chivalrous, tender-hearted men, of whom, thank God, there are some few left, whose souls revolt at cruelty and revenge. And he did not know Gilmore's history. He had been shocked and disgusted at the latter's barbarity, when he himself had wished to spare the Indians.

Gilmore turned to old Pete.

"Have you got any thing to eat, Peter?" he asked. "I have not tasted food since yesterday morning."

Pete Wilkins jumped up in a moment.

"Sit right down," he exclaimed; "yer must be nigh starved. Here's some beef. Hev a cup of coffee. Now don't ye speak a word till ye've eaten yer fill."

And Little Gilmore did as he was bid, and ate and drank. Frank Weston, in the mean time, acquainted Saint Pierre and Nathalie with the history of the desperado, which somewhat changed their opinion of him. But Saint Pierre could not become cordial, try as he would. During the rest of the journey he avoided Gilmore; and the latter, strange to say, did not resent the coldness, as he would have done a little while before.

Little Gilmore was a changed man, silent and reserved, and keeping to himself. When old Pete questioned him as to his success in the chase of the renegade, he answered:

"Wilkins, I found him at last. He is dead. But pray do not question me. The subject is a painful one. I thought that revenge would be sweet. And so it was—for five minutes."

And he relapsed into a gloomy silence, for some time. Pete watched him furtively. Presently he turned to the hunter.

"Wilkins," he resumed, "I promised you all of my gold and jewelry, if you brought me face to face with that man. **Take them all.**"

"I won't touch a durned red," said Pete, stoutly. "I didn't help yer, and I wouldn't take gold fur blood, anyhow. Keep it, lad. I've got more than I'll ever need."

"I know it," returned Gilmore, gloomily. "Time was when the riches of that valley might have made me happy; but now—Wilkins, take the warning of a hardly-used man, who gave back blood for blood. Sir, it's the bitterest thing **when it's over, that same revenge.**"

And the desperado checked his horse, and fell to the rear of the train, where he rode gloomily on by himself for the **rest of the journey.**

By this time they had passed the frontier settlements, and were approaching Austin. Gilmore bade them adieu at the latter place, and they never heard of him again, except that he was still in Texas, pursuing his old trade as gambler and desperado.

At some future day we may trace the career of this strange man more fully. For the present we must leave him, to **follow our party.**

It may not surprise our readers to hear that Frank Weston, although the *celebrity* passed within two miles of old Morcan's ranch, did *not* visit the beautiful Gabrielle.

He had caught the Black Mustang, but he did not claim his bride, according to her promise.

He preferred to let Eulalie continue mistress of the black. As they passed the walls of the hacienda, old Pete rode up to Weston, and made one or two remarks about it; but Frank's face became a mask of marble, and the old hunter was completely baffled in his curiosity.

How glad Weston was that Eulalie did not understand

English. The quantity of furs he told in French, that day, was surprising. But they passed the hacienda in safety, and stopped in Hamilton.

Their equipment and their drove of horses excited much comment, on the road through Texas. Often they were on the brink of discovery, which they dreaded, among the host of desperate characters which infest some parts of that State. But, by representing themselves to be horse-dealers, with a drove of horses that they had resolved to take through to New York, by sea, by way of Galveston, they averted suspicion. And they never stopped at a hotel, preferring to camp out in the fields, which, indeed, the number of their horses compelled them to do.

But at last they arrived safely at Galveston, after a rapid march. Frank Weston had left them, the day before, and had ridden rapidly thither to engage a vessel. He found a large brig that had just come in, in ballast from Boston, waiting for a cargo of cotton.

The price which he offered for a charter party soon settled the question of freight in his favor, and before the rest of the party arrived, the carpenters were hard at work, knocking up temporary stalls to accommodate the horses for the voyage.

Frank ordered hay and grain, *ad libitum*, to be sent to the ship, and then started to find his friends.

They were in camp on the mainland, and were safely ferrying over, horses, packs and all, to the island of Galveston. The most nervous part of the business was getting the gold and jewels into a safe place. But, even here, Frank got them out of the difficulty. In the presence of civilization he was full of expedients, where Pete Wilkins, the sage of the plains, was helpless.

He treated all the crew of the ship to a day ashore, and told them to "get good and drunk before they came back."

Sober like they were only too glad to do it. The captain and mates were given their holiday likewise, and thought that they had never known such liberal owners.

The money was supplied by selling two or three ingots at an exchange. The broker cheated them of one-third the value; but they did not wish to attract attention, so they submitted to the loss. Gold being worth about two hundred

and forty dollars to the pound, a very few pounds paid all their expenses.

While the crew was absent, the pack-saddles were unripped, and the gold concealed in the state-rooms of the passengers. When the sailors came back, three days after, all tired of their spree, they were forgiven so quickly, that they were only too glad to work for such liberal owners.

When the brig *Venus* sailed out of Galveston Bay, at least ten thousand pounds of solid gold, in ingots, was concealed under the berths in four state rooms. These were occupied respectively by Saint Pierre, his daughter, (still dressed in male attire,) Frank Weston, and Pete Wilkins.

Frank was the only one of the party except the Frenchman who had been to sea before, and the only one not seasick.

But the very circumstance of sea-sickness kept them in their berths, as a guard over their treasures, till they were nearing New Orleans.

Then they felt more at ease, and Pete Wilkins, who had suffered most of all from sea-sickness, observed :

"Wal, darn my karkidge, ef I wouldn't 'a' taken a three-cent stamp for all the gold under my bunk, ef they'd only put me ashore a week ago. But now I'm free o' the sea, and darn my karkidge ef them sailors gits my spondedicks."

It had been settled that the old hunter should come with them to New Orleans, and try how he liked the life of civilization. He had found out at last the sex of Isabelle, and the relation she bore to Frank; and his wonder at seeing the latter pass by Moreau's Ranch was dispelled.

"Ye done a durned sensible thing, boy, when yer cut loose from that ar' fly-away, Gabrielle," said the old hunter, when Frank told him the story; "and I'm durned ef she ain't a beauty, even in feller's duds. Gee—wisherly! Won't she look a ripper when she gits her fixin's on, as a gal?"

Pete had the pleasure of seeing her in them, before long. They arrived safely in New Orleans, where they landed their gold, and lodged it safely in bank.

There was a great sensation, when the news spread over the Crescent City of the arrival of the Texans, with such treasures. As usual they were enormously exaggerated. But

enough had been brought to realize two millions and a half in coin, and another million in emeralds.

People called it twenty millions, but people exaggerate every thing.

At all events, Saint Pierre and his family became the lions of the city for at least a week.

The lovely Estelle was married to Frank almost immediately after their arrival, and without any parade. They had no desire to leave their kind old father.

The Indian horses were sold at auction for low prices, but the pet horses of the valley, the General, and the celebrated Black were housed in splendid stables, at the rear of Saint Pierre's new house.

They attracted the attention of hundreds of visitors, on account of their singular beauty of form and color, and the distinguished grace which they exhibited when ridden by the handsome group that daily made its appearance on the levee.

The sturdy old Frankman, with his long beard flowing over his breast, his spare, elegant figure in a tight black frock, looked every inch the retired soldier.

His brilliant daughter, the "incomparable madame" of society, was well known, as the most beautiful lady, and the best rider in New Orleans, as she rode between her father and her darling and doted young husband.

Frequently there was a fourth member of the party, a tall, powerful old man, with a mass of grizzled hair and beard, that looked like the mane of a lion. He was seldom seen in the house, but appeared to be an intimate friend of the family; and as years go on and children come, old Pete Wilkins, known a wild and respectable member of society now, takes Frank's little boy on his knee, and tells him over and over again how his father went a-hunting, and found a beautiful wife and a princely fortune, at the end of the chase of the Black Mustang.

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